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THE
FLOWER OF THE FLOCK

BY

PIERCE EGAN

AUTHOR OF "THE POOR GIRL," &C., &C.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE
FLOWER OF THE FLOCK.

CHAPTER I.

And the sunlight clasps the earth.

SHELLEY.

From her chamber window he would catch

Her beauty faster than the falcon spies;

And constant as her vespers would he watch,

Because her face was turned to the same skies.

KEATS.

THE SHADOW IN THE SUNSHINE.

A BRIGHT sunny morning, at the end of June, in busy, restless London.

The overarching vault of heaven was filled with an atmosphere of golden hue. Sunshine was glowing upon cathedral turrets and upon the church spires, upon the pinnacles of lofty buildings, and the crowns of tall factory shafts. The bronzed and tarnished ball and cross of St. Paul's, and the shaggy-crested Monument, which "like a tall bully lifts its head," shone as if they had been newly gilded. There was sunshine upon chimney-pots and housetops, golden beams permeating the confined air in close garrets, through their narrow, half-closed windows; flooding wide

streets, and illuminating pestiferous courts, where riotous hilarity sometimes, but joy never came.

Sunshine blazed upon the broad and winding Thames, over whose flowing surface lazy barges dawdled, and panting river steamers raced, leaving in their sinuous paths myriads of scintillations—and rather an unpleasant odour as well. Sunshine was on the footways, and in the roadways, and in the gutters, making mirrors of small muddy pools.

Sunshine there was for the ragged and the richly dressed; for the beggar and the prince alike; for the robust and, happily, for the sickly invalid.

Sunshine everywhere, making brilliant the parks and open places, and interpenetrating all the foulest recesses of this huge city. Giving light where it was rarely seen, and rousing to a glad activity the teeming life already in its first throes of daily labour.

Beautiful in this, the bright sunshine! but oh, yet more enchanting in the glory with which it invested the fair face of a young girl, peering out of the upper window of a house situated in one of the City's closest streets.

She stood there, gazing heavenward, her mild blue eyes bending beneath the influence of the golden glare of sunny waves of light, yet seeming to revel in their luxuriance as though they spoke to her in fairy language of other and happier times and places now far away.

Upon the opposite side of the street, in the shop of a working goldsmith, one John Harper, there stood a

youth, an apprentice to the noble art of working in gold. The beauty and the clearness of the fair morning had elevated and refreshed his youthful spirits, but ah! how much greater their exhilaration when his upturned eyes were gladdened by the sight of that beautiful young girl, whose radiant face, and delicately modelled form, were brought out in brilliant relief by the dazzling sunbeams.

It seemed to him that his brightest conceptions of the beautiful, his dreamy fashionings of a faultless ideal, combined with all his native and his acquired skill, had never yet enabled him to realise "a thing of beauty" to rival the perfect excellence and marvellous charms of that young face upon which his eager eyes were now fastened.

Raphael, in his rarest art-performance had not in his belief attained the sentiment of angelic purity beaming in her features, nor had Carlo Dolci, in the loveliest Madonna he ever painted, anticipated it.

Motionless he stood, and with suspended breath gazed upon her as though she were one lone bright star, shining unaccompanied in the vast field of the deep blue heavens, in the silent night, his mind the while lost in a maze of rapture and of wonder.

Yet he had seen it often for years!

And now he had a consciousness that a saddening gloom overspread the earth far and near. What made the surrounding space in a moment so sombre? Had a huge cloud suddenly sprung up from its sullen rest,

and spreading itself enviously over the broad sky, absorbed the sunlight? Was the sunshine which had converted smoky London into a city of golden palaces abruptly withdrawn? No! sunbeams yet glanced upon the buildings, and danced upon the rippling waters, but the young maiden had disappeared from her window. She had suddenly fled from it, as a startled fawn would spring into a covert at the sound of the approaching footsteps of a hunter bent upon its destruction.

So, though the sunshine was as brilliant as before—the whole universe, in the eyes of Harry Vivian, the young goldsmith, seemed plunged into a profound and solemn gloom—for she was no longer where he yet gazed.

He felt oppressed in this glittering sunshine, which had no light for him, and he drew towards the outer door, that in the free fresh air he might breathe more freely. As he gained the threshold, he started, and an exclamation of surprise escaped his lips.

Opposite, at the door of the house in which dwelt the young girl upon whom his eyes had gazed so fondly, stood a man who in costume and manner was the reverse of prepossessing. Who was he, and what could he want there? were questions which Harry at once put to himself. He had come on business—most disagreeable business—that was beyond a doubt, for there was nothing either in his garb or in his manner which betrayed the idle visitor. Harry, therefore, conceived it to be his especial duty—with rather questionable propriety, however—to observe his movements.

He saw the man examine the house from the scraper at the door, to the parapet below the roof, and then make a peculiar sign to some person or persons, who lying *perdu*, prevented Harry from catching a glimpse of them. Then he gave a treble knock at the door, facing which he was standing. Young Vivian did not like that knock. It was not a peal of three distinct knocks for a third-floor lodger, nor was it the easy rat-tat-tat of a genteel visitor. No; it was a bad imitation of a postman's knock, followed by a faltering, sneaking tap.

Had any embarrassed individual, accustomed to visits from rent-distrainers or process-servers, heard that knock and caught sight of that man at his door, he would have instantly implored some other inmate of the house to tell the visitor that he had sailed to the furthest extremity of the Hudson Bay territory, and would never be home again.

The fact was, it was not alone that the knock was a tell-tale, but the man's dress also loudly proclaimed the purport of the visits he paid. Upon his head, slinking down to his eyebrows, was a hat which had long endured severe stress of weather, to its disadvantage. Upon his body—and that was his mark—he wore a loose brown great coat, styled by advertising tailors, "the sack," It was dirty, discoloured, much worn at the pockets, and strongly impregnated with the odour of the cheapest and rankest tobacco.

That coat, worn at the hottest end of June, betrayed

him. It was his sign-board. A child brought up in that neighbourhood would have told you, by that coat, worn in the height of summer heats, the nature of his profession.

The young goldsmith, on seeing him, held his breath; he had a conviction that the man's errand would of necessity prove an unpleasant one; and, after a moment's reflection, he stepped over the threshold of the shop-door, apparently engaged in looking up and down the street, but he never took his eye for an instant off the man in the dingy brown coat.

That individual had just raised his extremely dirty fingers to repeat the offensive knock, when the street-door slowly opened, and an elderly, wan-faced man presented himself.

"It is her father," muttered the young goldsmith, retiring within his shop, yet only a few paces, for—though uninfluenced by any meanly inquisitive motives—he felt constrained to watch the proceedings of the shabby, brown-coated personage.

He observed the wan old man and his visitor engaged in rather a vigorous colloquy, conducted with brutal coarseness on the part of the man in the brown coat, and on the other side with the air of one upon whom some heavy and startling demand is made, which he is wholly unprepared or unable to meet.

After some extravagant gestures had been exhibited by both persons, the individual in the dingy brown sack abruptly terminated it, by thrusting rudely back

the pale-faced old man, springing past him, and ascending the stairs. Wringing his hands, with a distracted aspect, the old man staggered after him.

The quick eye of Harry Vivian had detected the agonised bearing of the old man during the whole time he was in conversation with his unwelcome visitor. He had with pain perceived the emotion of horror which seemed to paralyse his limbs as he tottered up the stairs after the dusky fellow, and, with nervous apprehension, he wondered what scene was then being enacted in the apartments above.

Was that fair young creature present? In all human probability she was. Possibly subjected to the coarse insults of the unprepossessing individual who had forced his way into her presence. The teeth of the youth set firmly together as the thought intruded itself, and he felt that it would prove an infinite comfort to him, if he detected the vulgar rascal in any act of insolence addressed to her, to grip him by the nape of the neck, and fling him out of the window into the street.

At this moment, old Harper, the goldsmith, his master, and his uncle too, made his appearance from an inner workshop. Young Vivian, who was racking his brain for a scheme which should enable him to make one of the party opposite, turned quickly to him and said—

“Oh, sir, I am glad you have come in! There is the silver race cup from Rixon’s, which ought to have been sent to the chaser’s; it has been overlooked. It

is wanted home quickly. Don't you think I had better run over with it at once to old Wilton?"

"Wilton! No, Hal!"

"No, sir. Why not?"

"He was so slow over the last things we gave him to chase. You ought to remember that, Hal, for you used to run over there constantly to urge him on, you know."

Hal turned suddenly scarlet.

"That won't do," continued the goldsmith; "so in future, I think we had better send all these jobs to old Verity, at the back of the Sessions House."

The perspiration stood in small globes on the forehead of young Vivian.

"You forget, sir," he said, with a pleading tone, "that Wilton has been long in failing health, that it is not so long since he lost his wife. Oh! sir, this is not a time to take his work away."

Mr. Harper gently stroked his chin.

"Well, no, Hal, it is not," he said, after a short pause; "but, at the same time, his unfortunate position is not an excuse we can offer to the firms who employ us for delay in the work with which we are entrusted; and it would be unfair to ourselves to allow the shortcomings of others to prove the occasion of loss of custom to us."

"But I will answer for Wilton's punctuality this time," urged Hal, eagerly; "and you know he is our best chaser. Shall I run over with it, and impress

upon him that it is wanted as soon as it can be done?"

"Well you may, Hal," said the goldsmith; "but remember to point out to him the necessity for punctuality. Assure him that if there be any delay over the completion of this job, he may reckon it as the last he will have from us."

The apprentice, with a pleased smile, nodded his head, caught up the cup, which bore upon it a rare example of his own skill, and ran out of the shop.

A moment more, and a sharp ringing knock was heard at the door of the house in which dwelt old Wilton the gold chaser.

Another moment, and the apprentice stood within the chamber he had so longed to enter, and he became at once a spectator and a participator in a painful scene.

The sounds of angry altercation caught his ear as he reached the room door, the gruff tone of voice of the unwelcome guest preponderating. Acting upon and animated by an impulse which he perhaps would not have cared to acknowledge even to himself, he did not pause to crave admission, but entered the room without displaying the courtesy of a preliminary knock.

He saw before him old Wilton, and facing him the terror-dealing man in brown. They were at high words. On the appearance of Hal, both men became silent, and fixed their eyes intently and inquiringly upon him. They waited for him to speak.

The apprentice cast his eyes quickly round the room,

but the maiden he hoped to see was not there, and he drew breath. He perceived that he was expected to commence the conversation, and, clearing his voice, he said, hurriedly—

“Mr. Wilton, I have some work here for you.” He put the silver cup upon the table. “It will require your nicest skill, and the instructions are therefore rather elaborate, so, if you please, I will wait until you are disengaged before I”——

“No! no! no!” exclaimed old Wilton, interrupting him. Snatching up the cup, he thrust it back into the arms of young Vivian—“take it away—take it away!” he added, almost frantically, “it must not remain here now. No! no! no!”

“Why not?” asked the individual in the loose great coat, sharply.

“Silence! speak not,” cried Wilton, hoarsely, glaring at him; and then turning to the apprentice, he ejaculated, with great excitement, “Go—go; I beg—I entreat you to go away. Pray, young sir, go!”

“But I interposes a objection,” intervened the former speaker, and, turning to Vivian, he said, with an assumption of authority—“You’ll be so kind as to put that ’ere piece o’ plate down where you put it jes’ now.”

“Suppose I do not?” rejoined Vivian, sharply, turning his bright eye full upon the speaker, with an expression that savoured very strongly of a disposition to resist. The dirty man did not like the language it spake, but he affected not to be influenced by the

threat it conveyed. He answered, temperately yet impressively—

“That is jes’ what I don’t suppose. Look here, young genl’mán, you don’t know me—my name’s Jukes!”

It might have been Snooks, or Wiggins, or any other name not down in the category of the young man’s acquaintances or friends. The indifference he displayed on hearing it could not be greater if it had. He so expressed himself, for which Mr. Jukes rewarded him with a stare of astonishment, and whistled. Then he chuckled—

“You’re in luck, you are,” he continued; “but then you are young, you’ll werry likely know me better some day. I’m a sheriff’s officer.”

Certainly the youth recognised the office if he did not the man’s name. A thrill ran through his frame as the fellow hissed the words between his teeth, and a sound like a low wail burst from the lips of old Wilton.

The youth turned towards him, his bosom swelling with the generous impulses natural to his age, and, in tones of earnest sincerity, he exclaimed

“Can I, in any way, aid you, Mr. Wilton?”

The tone, the look, the gesture of the warm-hearted youth needed nothing to commend them to the keen appreciation of the old gold-worker, and his eyes filled with tears as the generous proffer fell upon his ears, but he shook his head sorrowfully.

"I thank you, Master Vivian," he said; "but you cannot help me. No, you cannot aid me."

"You do not know, Mr. Wilton, what I might be able to accomplish, if you would give me the opportunity," he urged.

"No, no," replied the old man, "leave me to battle it out with this man as best I may."

"And jes' leave that cup afore you go," exclaimed Mr. Jukes, addressing Vivian. "It'll help the hassets."

"I do not intend to go yet," said Hal Vivian; "but when I do, believe me I shall take no instructions from you about the destination of this cup."

Mr. Jukes whistled shrilly by the united aid of his first and third fingers, and instantly the room door opened. A couple of yet shabbier and much dirtier personages than Mr. Jukes made their appearance. That individual waved his hand towards them, and performed the ceremony of introduction.

"Mr. Nutty and Mr. Sudds, genl'men," he said. "One on 'em, Mr. Nutty, I shall leave here in possession on a *fi. fa.*, and Mr. Sudds will assist me in arresting Eustace Wilton on a *ca. sa.*, and in taking on him a country walk to a spunging-house."

Old Wilton turned as pale as death, and groaned in bitter anguish. Young Vivian felt a flush of heat pass over his frame.

"Can nothing be done?" he asked of Jukes, earnestly.

Mr. Jukes raised his dirty hand to his mouth, and

recklessly bit his foul thumb-nail. He plunged into a fit of reflection. Suddenly he raised his head, and said to his companions—

“Go outside a moment.”

They obeyed him, and quitted the room. Then he said to the youth—

“I hold warrants on two judgments against Wilton for one thousand pounds each. On the one I takes his traps, on the other I takes his body. So you see as he can’t satisfy ’em, young mister, he’ll be cleaned out, and become a reg’lar pauper, on the poor side, in quod; and he must rot in quod, for he can’t take the benefit of the hact, that I knows. That’s bad enuff, ain’t it?”

“It is horrible!” ejaculated Hal, with a glance of commiseration at the old man, who, with downcast eyes and set teeth, was listening to every word that fell from the man’s lips.

“Of course it is,” repeated Mr. Jukes, with an air of triumph. “Now he may save himself from all this, and like the princesses and queen’s children in fairy tales, live happy ever arterwards, if he chooses not to be hobstinate.” Mr. Jukes spoke with emphasis. “I wants him jes’ to sign a little bit o’ paper. He has only to make a flourish with a pen, and there he is a free man agin with all his traps about him.”

Mr. Jukes paused. Young Vivian approached old Wilton.

“Your position is a grave one, Mr. Wilton,” he said;

“let me respectfully suggest that if a simple signature will free you from two heavy claims”——

“Two thousand pounds, two *thousand* pounds!” interposed Jukes, elevating his voice as he repeated the amount of the sum.

“Simple signature!—simple signature!” almost screamed the old man. “You do not know what you ask, young sir. Sign it. Never! I will starve, rot, die, first.”

“Then you must starve, die, and rot,” roared Mr. Jukes, entirely losing his previous equanimity. “We’ll have no more o’ your nonsense. Hallo there! Sudds and Nutty, come in here, and let’s go to business; ketch ’old of Eustace Wilton there, Sudds; and you, Nutty, begin to take a hinventory of these ’ere chattels.”

Had the men thus summoned to appear, indulged themselves while outside the door with the pastime of listening at the keyhole, they could hardly have made a quicker response, than they did to the call of Jukes.

But as they entered the room by one door, a young girl ran into it by another, and cast her arms about the old gold-worker’s neck, saying, in an affrighted tone—

“Dear, dear father, who and why are these men here? why are you in such grief?”

The old man sank upon a seat; bowing his face upon the table and burying his hands in his gray hair, he sobbed with agony.

The girl only tightened her loving embrace, and

turned her face towards the ruffians who were about to jest at the situation.

It was the young Madonna-faced maiden Vivian had seen at the window, seeming like a golden seraph in the sunshine

When Jukes perceived the exquisite countenance of Wilton's daughter turned with an aspect of distressed inquiry towards him, he instinctively removed the hat of many showers from his dusty head, and made her a slight bow. His satellites also approached as near as they could to an imitation of his action, and stood still, instead of displaying, as they had intended, a vast amount of unnecessary activity.

This respect was an instinctive tribute to her innocent loveliness. Purity commands reverence even as beauty does admiration.

Vivian felt, with a rising in the throat, a sudden desire to produce from his pocket—which contained but a very few shillings—several thousand pounds, with which to pay off the debt, and then an almost irresistible inclination to trundle down the stairs, and out of the house, the three fellows whose presence created so much misery.

He could do nothing, however, but clear his voice, and, addressing the young lady, say—

“This is a most unhappy affair, Miss Wilton; and I regret very sincerely that it is in my power to do little either in the way of assistance or advice; but, with your permission, I will fetch over my uncle,

Mr. Harper; he possesses vast experience, and no doubt he will show us a way out of this maze of difficulty and affliction."

He did not wait for her permission, but running across the road, returned the silver cup to its former place; and, in a few hurried, passionate words, explained to his uncle what had occurred. He succeeded in prevailing on him to return with him to Wilton's apartments, in some vague hope that he would be able to suggest a mode by which the old man might be saved from destruction.

A most painful scene followed the appearance of Mr. Harper. By pertinent questions, he elicited that, under circumstances which could not then be explained, Wilton had given bonds to the amount of two thousand pounds; that those bonds were over-due; that he had been sued for the recovery of the amount; that judgment had been obtained against him, and that execution had issued; but, withal, the man Jukes was empowered to withdraw arrest and execution, on the condition that Wilton signed a certain document which Jukes then had in his possession. This signature Wilton sternly and inflexibly refused to give; and when it was urged upon him to do so, for the sake of her who was wholly dependent upon him, he grew frenzied, and vowed that he would submit to death rather than comply. Mr. Harper, the goldsmith, finding that reasoning, expostulations, suggestions, and pleadings, were alike in vain, said there was no way to save him, and matters

must take their course. Like a vulture pouncing upon its prey, Jukes seized upon the almost lifeless old man, and proceeded to drag him away. His daughter clung in horrified agony to him—in truth, it was a sad and painful sight. It was scarcely more than a year since death had ruthlessly torn her mother from this fair young child, and now it seemed as though the grim tyrant, in the person of Jukes, was robbing her of her father also.

The old man's knees trembled, and his under-jaw quivered, as though he had been smitten with the palsy. He embraced his daughter with frenzied emotion, and in tones of passionate grief, cried—

“Flo’! Flo’! my own, my beautiful darling, I leave you but for a brief time. Bear up against this dreadful visitation as bravely as you can, my girl. It is for the sake of your brother and for you, darling, that I endure this misery; but have trust, my child, in an all-righteous Creator—happiness will come to us again some day, my child—some day.”

“I will do my best, dear father, if you will take me with you,” murmured Flora, through her blinding tears: “I will strive to be brave, and to endure patiently and calmly; but oh! indeed, indeed it will terrible to be left here alone.”

She flung herself upon his neck, and sobbed bitterly.

Mr. Harper coughed, a watery mist shrouded everything from the sight of young Vivian, but Mr. Jukes,

declaring that he had no warrant of arrest against any "gals," turned spitefully on old Wilton, tore him from the agonised embrace of his weeping child, and bore him away. Mr. Harper followed them down the stairs, to see that no unnecessary harshness was employed in conveying the trembling prisoner into the street.

When they were gone, Flora Wilton sank, half-fainting, into a chair. Hal approached her, and, in a gentle voice, he said to her—

"Your brother Mark and I were intimate friends, Miss Wilton, before he went abroad—will you not also look upon me as a friend? It is not in my power to do much, yet all that I can do to serve you shall be done with my whole heart. Pray believe me. I will not obtrude upon the very natural grief which now so heavily weighs you down, but I entreat you, when you may need aid not to forget me."

Flora rose up. She turned her large, beautiful eyes—yet more lustrous from the tears which filled them—upon him, and with a quivering lip, murmured—

"Oh, Mr. Vivian, kindness at a moment like this is doubly valuable. It has a language which of late has been very, very strange in our ears; and now that—that he—he is gone, I—I"—

Her voice gradually became inaudible, as her features were overspread with a death-like paleness. She stretched out her small white hand, as though to feel for some place to lean upon for support. She appeared at a moment to have been stricken with blindness; she

tottered, swayed to and fro, and would have fallen heavily upon the ground but that Hal, with a sudden cry, caught her in his strong arms and saved her.

The exclamation uttered by Vivian attracted the attention of Mr. Nutty. He was making out an inventory of the furniture in the room, and had just written down in a penny memorandum book, “4 orsaire cheers, 1 tabbel,” when he heard the same voice cry—

“Run for some water! Quick! Run!”

He responded instantly:

“Water be blowed; I can’t go for no water; I’m the man in possession.”

CHAPTER II.

I'll tell thee what, my friend,
He is a very serpent in my way ;
And wheresoe'er this foot of mine doth tread
He lies before me. Dost thou understand me ?
SHAKSPERE.

THE WORM UPON THE LEAF.

SUNSHINE still !

Sunbeams making a golden palace of a Gothic mansion in the Regent's Park, gilding its fretted roof, its traceries, and its triple arched and ornamented windows, tinting the graceful trees which gently waved in the gardens before and behind it, scattering golden stars upon the lake, and investing the flowers and shrubs with a beauty which rendered the place around little less than an earthly paradise.

Sunshine and sunbeams in all places without the walls of the mansion—shadows within.

In a room, magnificently furnished, containing every appliance a morbid attention to personal comfort could need, or the invention of luxurious imagination could devise, were seated an elderly gentleman, his wife and three daughters.

One of these girls was a beauty—all had pretensions to good looks, but she was strikingly handsome.

The name of the owner of this mansion was Grahame. He was a pale, stern-looking man. A dress suit of black, and a white cravat, which seemed to have the effect of being unpleasantly and rather dangerously tight about his neck, added to the austerity of his aspect.

His wife, an intensely proud woman, whose pride was apparent in her air, her dress, her features, sat like an imperious creature whose foible had no other quality than the worst species of haughtiness.

Like the very frankest person in the world, she wore—

Her heart upon her sleeve,

and displayed its entire sentiment in the material of which her attire was made, in its fashion, and in the style in which it was worn. The jewellery upon her wrists, her arms, her fingers, about her neck, and at her waist, betrayed the only feeling of which she was capable. She lived, moved, breathed in an atmosphere of inordinate, unreasoning pride—no other; and the “people” who came in contact with her felt it before she uttered a word to or glanced at them. In her eyes they were pottery of the commonest earthen material, whilst the clay of which she was herself formed, produced a porcelain of the rarest kind. So she sat; to be looked at, not touched.

Her husband, outwardly was of the same stamp.

Within, he was begrimed with cowardly meanness, granite selfishness, a cringing obsequiousness to the wealthy and the powerful, and an icy haughtiness to all whom he understood to be his inferiors in position. By his standard, pride was measured as honour and nobility of soul, gold as the essence of all virtue.

His daughters, brought up under such guidance, could hardly fail to be impregnated with the principles—or, rather, lack of principle—by which their parents were governed. Yet exercised upon the youngest, their influence failed to win a proselyte. Her organisation had not been adapted by nature to receive the impressions the authors of her being laboured to create, and, therefore, when she hazarded an opinion favourable to the purest sympathies of a kindly nature, or displayed an emotion which betrayed that she had a heart, she was called a fool, and treated as a pariah by the whole family. She had been christened Evangeline, but her imperial mamma frequently informed her it was a misnomer—that, in truth, her name should have been Gosling, which she had somewhere heard, meant a young goose, truly a young silly goose.

The second daughter resembled her mother in all things—was, in fact, her counterpart; she even bore her dualistic name, Margaret Claverhouse, and like her maternal parent, was supremely proud and hateful in all her characteristics.

The eldest girl, the beauty of the family, was composed of somewhat discordant elements. In person

she was eminently attractive, her figure was tall and commanding, and its outline was as graceful as its air was majestic. Her face, as we have said, was extremely beautiful, but he must have a bold heart, who, falling in love with it, would woo her in the expectation that he could win her with ease and retain her by indifference. Her features were regular, her eyes large, glittering, and of that deep brown which is often mistaken for black; her eyelids were full, and her eyelashes so long as really to form a fringe to the lid. Her eyebrows were arched, her hair was darker than her eyes, and not less brilliant. Her mouth was small, yet it had a sensual fulness, no less apparent than the scornful curl which ever seemed to keep it in a state of unrest. As the hand of her maid was skilled, and incessantly in requisition, the arrangement of her tresses—that wondrous ornament to woman—may be said to have been faultless. Her attire was admirably chosen to assist her beauty, and its fit was a triumph of the *modiste's* art. Her mother had instilled into her a belief that she was a queen of beauty, and she looked, thought, moved, as though she were an empress.

As yet it was supposed that her affections had not been touched; from infancy she had been tutored to believe that to be human in feeling was to descend to the level of the common herd—that the world and what it contained were made for her, not she for the world. She was gifted with all the elements of which energy and passion are composed, and she was capable of loving

with a force not often allotted even to woman ; but her passions, her energies, her tenderness, had been rendered dormant by the counsels of worldly pride, as the warm, gushing, health-giving stream is converted by a slow frost into a silent, motionless block of ice.

Should there come before her eyes the man whose physical beauty and whose mental intelligence woke up her heart from its icy dream into passionate life, and that love should prove to be unrequited—woe ! woe ! to her ! and possibly to him ! She had been named Helen after a maternal relative, from whom the most exaggerated expectations were entertained, and she bore it as though she, in virtue of it, already possessed the vast inheritance it was understood to foreshadow.

This family were engaged—while the broad sunshine was gladdening the poor and the respectable, promenading in the park, into which the windows of the mansion looked—in discussing the conduct of the only son of the house of Grahame, who, instead of having obtained at college a “double first” for the honour of the family, had forwarded home a packet of tradesmen’s accounts, the gross total of which considerably exceeded the handsome allowance placed to his credit by his father. Mr. Grahame spoke with considerable dissatisfaction of the course his son must have pursued to have plunged thus largely into debt ; and, though it was in accordance with his wish that his son had for his college companions and intimate acquaintances, the Duke of St. Allborne, the young Earl of Carlton, and

the experienced Lord Suedmuch, yet he thought that even their intimacy, at the price his son had paid for it, or rather that which *he* was called upon to pay, much too dear, and he expressed himself on the subject with an emphasis which his pride rendered unusual.

Mrs. Grahame turned upon him a sidelong glance with her half-closed eyes, and said coldly and contemptuously—

“He is a Grahame! The members of that race are not used to measure their wants, their pleasures, or even their caprices, by miserable considerations of economy. I said to Malcolm, when we parted—‘Remember, always, that you are a Grahame. If those with whom you associate act as though their wealth ran a stream whose source is inexhaustible, let your expenditure be no less illimitable than theirs, even to represent, in wealth, a river whose’”——

“Confluence is a sea of dissipation and of debt,” sharply exclaimed Mr. Grahame, taking a pinch of snuff out of a gold, diamond-studded snuff-box.

“Mr. Grahame, your sense of the dignity of your position is becoming impaired,” responded the stately lady, wholly closing her eyes.

“No, madam,” he returned, “pardon me, I simply object to unnecessary and preposterous extravagance.”

An expression of ineffable disdain passed over the lady’s features.

"Claver'se Grahame," she remarked, in a frigid tone, "have you, at a moment, become poor?"

The face of Mr. Grahame instantly changed to a brilliant scarlet hue, then to a purple, finally it became livid. Globules of cold perspiration gathered thickly upon his brow. He thrust his chair back a few paces, and there was something of an affrighted expression in his eyes as he gazed upon her. Her eyelids were yet close down over her pale gray eyes as he wiped the deathly damp from his brow.

Helen Grahame turned her bright dark eyes upon him with a scornful look. In her estimation, the concentration of meanness of soul was to place a limit upon lavish expenditure. She did not utter a word, but she tried to balance in her own mind which of the two occasioned her father the most terror—her mother's cold displeasure or Malcolm's extravagance.

Margaret thought with her sister that economy was but another word for a despicable narrowness of soul. Not but that she was economical enough when called upon for an exercise of charity; but for any selfish purpose, a compulsory contraction of expenditure would have been regarded by her as an example of the lowest and most vulgar niggardliness. She listened with disdain to her parent, and thought that it was incumbent upon her father to give like a Grahame, in order that her brother Malcolm should lavish it like a Grahame.

Evangeline, to whom the conversation had been

distressing, observing that her father had become suddenly silent, raised her soft eyes and marked the expression that passed over his features. In alarm she hastily left her seat, and in a low, affectionate tone, said, as she took his hand and leaned over him—

“Dear sir, you are not well, you are agitated, can I”——

“Keep your seat, Evangeline,” he exclaimed hoarsely, as he drew his hand from her petulantly. “I am not agitated—I am well—you are obtrusive and impertinent.”

Evangeline retreated to her place at the window; she took up the embroidery on which she had been engaged, and went on with it in silence, but a tear dropped upon her work; no one heeding the “young silly goose,” it passed unnoticed.

Mrs. Grahame spoke again.

“Malcolm is coming home,” she said, “and he has invited two of his college companions—the young Duke of St. Allborne, and the Honourable Lester Vane to accompany him here on a visit. No doubt Mr. Grahame, you will not lose so valuable an opportunity to impress upon your son, in the presence of his spendthrift associates, that your narrow income forbids your meeting claims which”——

“Madam,” interrupted Mr. Grahame, tartly, “it is you who are losing a sense of your position now. Let us change the subject. I will speak with Malcolm upon his return. A proper maintenance of his position, and

the honour of his House is one thing : a disreputable squandering of his income quite another. In that spirit I speak now—in that spirit will I address myself to him.”

“Who is the Honourable Lester Vane?” inquired Margaret Grahame of her mother.

“A young man of an ancient and high family,” replied Mrs. Grahame—“immensely rich.”

“And very handsome,” exclaimed Helen ; adding, “so at least Malcolm writes me. He praises him highly, declares that he possesses great personal attractions, and is sure—I—we shall all like him much.”

“He did not name him in the few lines he wrote to me,” said Margaret.

“But he did to you, Eva, did he not?” remarked Helen, turning her brilliant eyes with a mocking glance upon her youngest sister.

Agush of tears came again into the eyes of Evangeline. She did not raise them from her employment, that her emotion might be seen by her sisters. She answered with a quivering lip, and in a low, faltering tone.

“I suppose Malcolm had not time to write to me. I have had no letter from him since he has been gone.”

Margaret smiled. She was not accustomed to laugh.

“You ! Absurd ! do you think he would write to you ? what conceit !” she observed, with a gesture of contempt.

What other feeling should she entertain for a sister

who possessed merely the cardinal virtues, and was utterly deficient in an appreciation of worldly pomps and vanities?

At this part of the conversation, there was a tap at the door of the apartment; it opened at the same moment, and an individual, attired in a suit of black of the most approved court dress cut, advanced into the room. The eyes of the family were turned upon him, but he scarcely appeared to be disposed to collapse under that honour. His neck was garnished with an unexceptionable cravat, which was arranged with such precision that it seemed to be wrought in alabaster and carved elaborately. His wig—for as he confessed to admiring *confrères*, he had dispensed with his “own ’air”—looked as though it had been subjected to a severe storm of whitewash and had been violently brushed. He approached his master, and, bending over him, said, in a confidential manner, yet with a gesture of grave but humble deference.

“Thet pesson is come, sir!”

“Who?—what person?” inquired Mr. Grahame with the air of one who denied the right of any “person” to seek an audience with him.

“The pesson concerning which you gave me hinstuctions, sir—I asked ’im into the libree, sir.”

“Into my library, man?” cried Mr. Grahame, rising up, angrily. “Pray what does the fellow mean? How dare you ask any ‘person’ into my library without my instructions to that effect?”

“He said he were Mr. Chewkle, sir, and if you please to remember”——

The face of Mr. Grahame turned as pale as death, and then changed to an intense crimson.

“Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes!” he cried hurriedly, altering his tone; “return to him—say I will come to him immediately.”

The man bowed, and quitted the room.

Mr. Grahame walked to the window and looked out into the sunlight. It lay upon the grassy lawn, upon the sloping meads, upon the waving trees, like gleaming gold dust. The soft breeze made the leaves flutter merrily, birds darted to and fro in the clear air, singing gaily, and brilliantly attired ladies and children moved over the open places in the broad park, animated by the beauty of the scene, and the glory of the sunshine. Mr. Grahame looked distastefully upon it, it ill-assorted with the feelings at war within his breast, and he turned from it with an impatient exclamation. He set his teeth together, drew a long breath, and, with his features more pallid than usual, strode out of the room.

Mrs. Grahame—too much occupied with visions of her own dignity, when she thought at all, which was not often—took no notice of the disturbed manner of her husband. If she had seen it, she would not have credited the evidence of her own eyes. A Grahame disturbed or agitated, the thing was impossible.

Neither did Helen, who was sketching fancy portraits

of the Honourable Lester Vane; nor Margaret, who was not even troubled by an effort of imagination, observe him; but Evangeline perceived his inward perturbation, and not daring to offer a word, or breathe a hope that she might aid in alleviating it, sat sadly at her needlework, filled with a foreboding that something foreshadowed trial and affliction to the House.

Mr. Grahame descended to his library. In one corner of it, upon the edge of a chair, under which his hat was placed, sat, with his knees close together, and his toes poised on the floor, a strange looking personage, a sort of hybrid between a fast banker's clerk, and an undertaker.

It was Mr. Chewkle.

Mr. Chewkle was an agent; a commission agent. He undertook any description of business, no matter what. He sold coals and coffee, he introduced distracted tradesmen to usurious bill-discounters. He offered two shillings and sixpence in the pound to indignant creditors for unhappy insolvents. He would supply you with a good article in tea, at two and eight. He raised money on mortgage and *post obit*, having a friend who did that sort of thing for spendthrifts who needed it.

He laid out money on fancy horses for fast individuals, with imaginary betting-men, though the horses he backed for them were rarely landed winners at the post. He knew all the good investments in mines, and would obtain shares for anybody, at a compara-

tively low price, though some day they "might" be at fabulous premiums. He—but he would undertake anything whatever, clean or dirty, if paid his commission, and "ask no questions," when the remunerator was liberal.

He rose up as Mr. Grahame entered, and made him a bow.

"Good morning, Chewkle," said Mr. Grahame, loftily; "well, what success?"

"We've got our man, safe, sir," he replied, with a feeble grin.

"Where?"

"Spunging-house, sir."

"And the family?"

"At the apartments, sir, but we shall move the goods to-morrow, for sale by the sheriff, and then they must go out you know, sir."

"Into the streets."

"Into the streets, sir, or the work'us. They've no resources, as I sees."

"Well, then, of course he has signed the undertaking?"

"A—a—not yet, sir."

"But he will?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

Mr. Grahame had seated himself with the air of a Mogul emperor giving audience to a Hindoo slave. He rose to his feet as if a pistol-shot had been discharged at him.

“Not! Nonsense!” he cried with fierce astonishment; “under such pressure, the man cannot possibly refuse.”

“But he does, sir, and swears he will not sign if he has to starve and rot in prison.”

Mr. Grahame passed his hand over his mouth, and gulped as if he would choke.

“What is to be done?” he asked.

“Do without it, sir,” suggested Chewkle, mildly.

“Ridiculous! His signature must be to the deed.”

“Well, sir,” said Mr. Chewkle, slowly, and looking carefully round the room to see that no other person was present, “so it may be there on the deed.”

Mr. Grahame looked at him steadfastly.

“How?” he asked.

Mr. Chewkle reduced his voice to a whisper.

“You have got his name on a letter, I s’pose?”

“Well, sir?”

“Not very difficult to write like it, I fancy.”

“Chewkle!” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, with dilated eyes, “what do you counsel?”

“Nothing, sir. I merely suggests that if the signature must be there on the deed, no obstinate old fool should prevent its being placed there, and, where money is not a hobject, it can easily be managed.”

Mr. Grahame’s teeth chattered, as if he had been suddenly transported into a frosty atmosphere.

“Chewkle,” he said, grimly, “do you know what the law declares such an act to be?”

Mr. Chewkle nodded with perfect self-possession.

“It must be done, sir,” he rejoined emphatically. “Your position depends on it. You must balance beggary, destitution, ruin, against rank, fortune, dignity”——

“FORGERY!” groaned Mr. Grahame, sinking into his chair, and pressing his hands over his eyes.

CHAPTER III.

- DUKE. You are welcome: take your place.
Are you acquainted with the difference
That holds this present question in the court?
POR. I am informed thoroughly of the cause,
Which is the merchant here and which is the Jew?

SHAKSPERE.

POSSESSION DISTURBED.

IN the dreams of Harry Vivian the delicate form and sweet, smiling face of Flora Wilton had appeared to him, and not unfrequently. But then she seemed ever to be some queen of faëryland, seated on a throne of gems of dazzling brilliancy, in floral realms of more exquisite beauty than mortal eye had ever beheld on earth, or waking fancy in its most gorgeous development could conceive.

In his moments of romantic imaginings, when his mind was filled with her beauty, he certainly had sketched a few scenes comprising events in which both he and Flora figured. Still his ardent imagination had not carried him beyond the presentation of a flower, and the reward for the gift with which the soft grateful look from eyes, the loveliest in the world, would enrich him.

He had never foreshadowed a time—for true love is ever subdued in action by the most genuine modesty—when he should within his arms, press to his throbbing heart the form which had in his eyes no equal, or that the face so rare in its perfection, should recline upon his shoulder, close to his lips.

Yet so it chanced to be. Circumstances he could have never shaped had come to pass, and the bliss of entwining his arms about the small, delicate waist of Flora Wilton was bestowed upon him at a moment the most unexpected, when he was unprepared to welcome it and unable to enjoy it.

Nay, rather than bliss, the emotion he experienced might be said to have been one of terror; not without its gratification, it is true, for he would not have resigned her, senseless as she was, to another for worlds. Still the deathly hue with which her features were overspread, the compressed lips, the closed eye, from which a tear had struggled, and, disengaging itself, lodged yet upon her cheek, made him fear that the frightful visitation which had so suddenly fallen upon her was a calamity greater than her gentle nature was able to sustain. He grew himself cold and faint as the supposition crossed him that, unless some sudden and energetic measures were adopted, she would pass from her swoon into the unawakening sleep of death.

Unacquainted with anything pertaining to fainting fits, and under a strong impression that swooning and giving up the ghost were synonymous, his calls for

water and for aid merged from the vehement into the frantic; he unheeded the representations made by Mr. Nutty that men in possession never quit the sight of goods placed in their charge until the amount they represent is satisfied; he threatened him most fiercely for not flying to execute his commands; but, at the close of a paroxysm of rage and agitation, he found Flora yet senseless in his arms, and Mr. Nutty dancing and declaiming, vowing that he would take the "lor" of "any willin as strove to hinterrupt him in his duty."

In the midst of this harangue by Mr. Nutty upon the majesty of his professional avocation, the door of the apartment opened, and a young girl glided in.

She had met old Wilton on the stairs, in custody of the officers, and had seen him borne away. She had loitered outside of the door of the apartment—she heard the low, sobbing wail of the afflicted girl, whose tears were wrung from her by the terrifying conviction that her destruction was involved in the loss of her father. She heard, too, the calls of Vivian, together with the angry colloquy between him and Nutty, and then she decided on offering her assistance.

She was only a cap-front maker, working for a wholesale house in the city, producing the fronts worn inside women's bonnets, for sevenpence halfpenny per dozen. She rose at six in the morning, and worked until twelve at night, in order to complete two dozen per diem. Out of the sum thus realized weekly

she had to live, pay her lodging, and find herself in clothes.

So she had not much time on her hands, nor much money in her pocket, and was what the every-day world calls a person of no importance.

But she had a heart—a gentle, compassionate, loving heart.

She was a very pretty girl, though her complexion was something wan, and her eyelids were rather tinged with pink ; but if these appearances detracted something from her prettiness, what did they not add to the interest and the sympathy raised in the beholder? They told of early rising and midnight toil, the rapid wearing out of young and beautiful human life, so that thousands of thoughtless beings of her own sex might set off to advantage their facial attractions—CHEAPLY.

Not to lengthen this digression—for we shall know much more of this young damsel by and by—Lotte Clinton, for that was her name, hearing the cry of young Vivian for “water,” entered the apartment, prepared to offer her services if they were likely to be required.

She saw Flora Wilton lying in the arms of Hal Vivian, whose handsome face she recognised in an instant, for she had often observed it from her garret window upturned to the house in which she dwelt, though his look reached not so high as where she sat peering behind her mignonette and nasturtiums.

Hal knew her not, but just now she made her appearance, to his conception, as an angel newly come from Paradise.

He turned his eager eyes upon her.

“Miss Wilton is in deep affliction,” he said, quickly, “she has fainted ; will you be so good as to bring some water ?”

“Place her in a chair,” said Lotte, softly, “she will be better there—she will have more air. I will run for water, and my smelling salts. Sometimes at night, I grow faint and dizzy, and cannot see my work, and they relieve me then wonderfully.”

She said this as she hurried out of the room.

Poor girl ! She had but too often had occasion to use the stimulant for the purpose she named.

Vivian almost unconsciously felt a reluctance to resign his beautiful burden, but he could not help seeing that the course proposed by Lotte was the proper one to be adopted ; therefore he placed the yet lifeless Flora, with the tenderest carefulness, upon a chair, and supported her drooping head upon his breast.

Lotte, swift of foot, had not been a minute obtaining the ammoniacal salts and a teacup with water in it. She did not possess a tumbler, for she could not afford herself beer, and the water she took at her dinner, or supper—when she could afford to indulge in the latter luxury—was as sweet to her out of a cup as a glass.

She set to work, as a woman almost instinctively proceeds in these matters. While she had all that tender

sympathy and commiseration which the condition of Flora could elicit from any one imbued with a generous susceptibility, she was endowed also with that species of calm self-possession and firm collectedness, so valuable in emergencies where human life is at stake.

She set Vivian to work bathing with the cool water the white temples from which his trembling fingers had parted the long waving hair, while she herself applied the ammonia to the nostrils of Flora, and chafed her palms when the inhalation had done its work.

Thus assaulted, nature returned to its duty, and reasserted its claims over the motionless system of the young girl, who gradually opened her eyes. Gazing wildly about her, she abruptly rose up from her seat, as though she had awakened out of some painful dream.

The faces of Vivian and Lotte seemed to confuse her; but when her large, sad eyes fell upon the unattractive countenance of Mr. Nutty, turned upon her with an aspect in which the expression was undecided—as he was not certain whether the swoon was a sham or a fact—memory returned, and her bereavement, with the future and all the horrors of its uncertainty—save that the direst poverty must attend it—burst upon her.

She wrung her hands in the fulness of her misery, and then she murmured through her blinding tears—

“Almighty Father! support me now!”

Lotte stole her arm about Flora’s waist, and whispered in her ear—

“Cheer up, Miss Wilton! you have friends who will not desert you.”

“Where?” she asked, bitterly. “I know of no relative, save my father and my brother. My father is in prison, my brother is far, far away, and I am a homeless, helpless, hopeless outcast.”

“Not hopeless!” exclaimed Vivian; “do not say that, Miss Wilton! Remember that I have told you, Mark and I were friends before he went away. I know him so well that I believe if any near and dear relative of mine were, during my absence, to fall into trouble and affliction, he would be the first to come forward and help her, and, as his friend, what he would do that ought I to do. I make no boast; but, oh! Miss Wilton, do not fear but that I will do my best, and that at least you shall not be helpless nor homeless while I can command a shilling, and have strength to work for one.”

“And you are a dear fellow, and make me foolish enough to cry, and I wish you wouldn’t,” said Lotte, her eyes suffused with tears.

“And, likewise, you are young and green—pea-green,” thought Mr. Nutty, as he put down in his inventory, “1 large spewn, 1 chimblee ornymint, and 1 arthwrugg.”

Flora, with eyes beaming with gratitude, proffered her hand to Vivian, who took it and pressed it. It would have been a dear delight to him to have kissed it, but he felt that this was not a time for such a display of gallantry or feeling.

“I know not how to thank you, Mr. Vivian,” she said, in trembling accents, “but I fear I cannot, while I sincerely appreciate your generous offers of assistance to me, avail myself of them. Your friendship for my brother gives to me no claim upon your aid, neither does it entitle me to accept it; and, guided by the precepts and counsels my dear father has implanted in my mind, I seem clearly to comprehend that it would be—may I say—an indiscretion were I to act otherwise than in most grateful terms to decline what your disinterested generosity has prompted you to propose. I confess that I have been terribly shocked and shaken by what has occurred, but the nervous tremor I at this moment endure will pass away, and I shall look with fervent faith to a brighter time.”

“Young and green, too,” thought Mr. Nutty—“sap-green,” and placed in his inventory, “1 im-midge—a figgur of Oap.”

Lotte interposed, as Hal, with rather a disconcerted aspect, was about to urge her acceptance of his renewed offer.

“Let us see, Mr. Vivian,” she said to him, “what to-morrow will bring forth. At present everything is in confusion; by to-morrow we shall know the worst; what can be done, and what there will remain to do. Then Miss Wilton will be better able to judge in what you can be of service to her, and I have no doubt she will feel less reluctance to accept the kindly aid you have offered in such a friendly and worthy manner now.”

“A sensible girl, that,” thought Mr. Nutty, “works for her livin’, an’ ’ard, too, I’ll be bound!” He put down at the same moment in his inventory, “a peece of clokk wurk wovnd up and goen; 1 nutmy graytur; 1 coles scuddel.”

Hal, seeing that the advice tendered by Lotte Clinton was acceptable to Flora, resolved to follow it, and turning to the former, he said—

“You understand far better than I do the way to manage in such a matter as this. I am only anxious to be of service, and my intention is sincere. I may, by a want of tact, produce an effect entirely opposite to that which I most desire. You are intelligent and good natured——”

“Thank you!” said Lotte, with a laugh.

“You are,” he repeated, “and I fancy you interpret justly my sincerity.”

“I am sure I do,” she answered promptly.

“Then I place myself in your hands; you will not leave Miss Wilton for the present?” he added.

“Not for a minute,” she replied.

“You are all that I could hope you to be,” he rejoined, “and if I can help you, you will send for me, won’t you?”

“Indeed I will!” responded Lotte.

“Bravo!” he cried. “Farewell, Miss Wilton—keep up your spirits; ‘When matters are at their worst they mend,’ you know, and surely your affairs could hardly be in a more unhappy predicament than at this moment.

Preserve your faith in the goodness of God, and do not despair of the future."

Flora could not reply; she could only return the pressure of his hand, and then hide her face upon the neck of Lotte Clinton.

Hal then breathed a few words into the ear of Nutty to the effect that, though he was an officer of the law, engaged in one of its most unpleasant duties, it was quite possible for him to do his "spiriting gently," but that if he should entertain a contrary opinion, and offer, or attempt to offer, to carry out in a spirit of hostility, arrogance, and coarseness, the part he had to perform, he might prepare himself for a reckoning, the settlement of which would not be in his favour.

Nutty was too old a hand at his craft not to know that it was best to be civil, when as he, in rather free terms, said—"There was summat hanging to it;" or to hesitate to be a brute when the utter poverty of the poor creatures whose goods were seized rendered even his possession money a question of doubt.

In the present case, he very sagaciously saw that if he acted in an apparently compassionate and considerate spirit to the daughter of old Wilton, and took care to let his behaviour come to the ears of young Vivian, his purse would be rendered all the heavier by it; but if he adopted an abrupt harshness of manner, terrified her, and permitted her to save no little trinket, upon which she set some priceless personal value, he might get a horse-whipping, inflicted with no light or unwilling

hand. He took, therefore, the suggestion of Vivian in good part, winked his eyes significantly, jerked his thumb over his left shoulder, placed his thumb to his nose, fluttered his fingers, and otherwise bewildered the apprentice, who could only presume that these evolutions meant that his wishes should be complied with. He, therefore, thought it incumbent upon him, not only to seem to comprehend them, but to so far imitate them, by slapping his pocket, tapping the palm of his hand with one finger, and pointing to Nutty, so as to give that grubby individual to understand that if he behaved kindly, there *would* be something "hanging to it."

Nutty smiled complacently, bent the most philanthropic and benevolent of glances upon Flora, nodded his head, and murmured, with a slight grin—

"I know all about it."

Thus assured, Harry Vivian waved his hand towards Flora.

"Keep up your spirits!" he cried; "all will go right yet."

Then, with an effort, he quitted the room, ran lightly down the stairs, and was soon in his uncle's private room, engaged with him in earnest conversation.

In the meantime, Lotte busied herself at the sacrifice of at least a dozen cap fronts, or rather half a dozen hours, to be replaced by six taken out of those devoted by her during the week to sleep, in conferring with Flora as to the course she would have to pursue when all the

furniture was swept away, and she was left penniless and destitute.

“Have you no relations in London?” inquired Lotte; “because if you have only one or two, I will pop on my bonnet and mantle, and run to them very quickly. Let them be who they may, they would surely afford you some help.”

“I never heard my father speak even of one in London or elsewhere,” returned Flora. “We have lived very secluded while here. We have not always lived thus. I can remember dwelling in a large house, with beautiful furniture, mirrors, chandeliers, and gorgeous decorations; lovely gardens, with fountains and flowers. But that is long, long ago. I know not when, I know not why, we left it, or when or how we came here. It seems to me that I awakened from a dream of faëryland, to find myself in these poor apartments, and my poor father destroying his life by the deadly closeness of his application to his labour.”

“You know, then, of no relations you could ask to help you?” said Lotte.

“None,” replied Flora.

“Nor friends whose assistance you might ask?”

Flora shook her head.

“Have you any money to go on with?”

“A little, which for safety is placed”——

“Where I want to know nothing about it,” interposed Mr. Nutty, abruptly. “See here—when I put down in my hin-vent-ory any harticle, you daren’t touch it

arterwards ; leastwise, you must give it up as I've put it down ; but you know you can do as you like with anything as I don't put down. Do you tumble?"

Mr. Nutty, having rather a mean opinion of the worldly experience of Flora, addressed his speech to Lotte, but that young lady, who had a shrewd guess at the intention sought to be conveyed in the first speech, did not comprehend quite clearly the last sentence, unless, as she conceived, the man had a notion that her professional avocation was dancing on horseback and leaping through hoops or over poles, held by colonels in the army of the Emperor of the Brazils. She, therefore, thanked him for the suggestion he offered, but at the same time mystified him by informing him that she had never been on horseback in her life.

In a few whispers she made Flora understand Nutty's meaning, and suggested that if there happened to be any article to which she attached any particular value, now was the time to transfer it to a place of safety, beyond the jurisdiction of Mr. Nutty.

Flora hesitated to avail herself of the offer—not so Lotte.

"There is my room," she said ; "no one can enter it unless I please : I have the key. You can put anything you like within it ; and I should like to see any one dare to come in and attempt to take it out."

Still Flora hesitated.

"These people seem to have the power to take all," she observed, "and if they are justly entitled to their

claim, it would be an act of dishonesty to keep anything back from them."

"Fiddle-de-dee, dear!" exclaimed Lotte. "You don't know that they are justly entitled, and therefore you have the right to assume that they are not. They act, at all events, like hard-hearted brutes, and that is why *I* believe they have no more right to a single thing here than I have. So I should act just as if they had not. Now I will tell you what my advice is. You point out to me what you, in your heart, should like to save, and leave the rest to me."

"That *is* a sensible gal," muttered Nutty, as he entered in his inventory—"1 save-ork, a arm chare and 1 floured assik."

At this moment there was a gentle knock at the room door, and Mr. Nutty opened it about two inches, and peered through.

"Wot d'ye want?" said he gruffly, to some one without.

"Miss Clinton—is she here?" asked a pleasant voice without.

"Don't know her—don't live here," said Nutty, slamming the door to.

Lotte screamed.

"Open it—open the door!" she cried; "it is my brother Charley."

In an instant she put Nutty aside, opened the door, and putting her head out, said, hastily—

"Come in, Charley; I am so glad you are here."

Then followed a sound as of the chirruping of young sparrows. It was Charley and Lotte performing the usual act of grace on meeting each other, it being customary for the pair to kiss a dozen times in rapid succession—a quick fire, painful only to those who don't participate.

Lotte led forward her brother, a rather smartly-dressed young man, and introduced him to Flora, with a manner which plainly said—"Isn't he a nice fellow?"

Flora was, however, in no mood for introductions to strangers, she bowed, but did not speak.

"Charley is a lawyer," said Lotte, triumphantly.

Flora slightly bowed again, without comprehending that the fact would be of any advantage to her, and Mr. Nutty snorted as if he instantly smelt hostile opposition to his supremacy.

The fact was, Charley was a lawyer's clerk, on twenty-five shillings per week, but he had improved the opportunities he possessed by working very hard, reading up the best works on the study and practice of the law, making himself master of cases which were precedents, and, in fact, doing his best to fit himself either for the bar, if he could raise the necessary funds to be called to it, or to be a first-class solicitor.

His principal object, as at present entertained by him, was to place his sister above the reach of want, and the necessity for her present life-destroying labour. He little knew how hard the work, how small the earnings. Out of his narrow weekly salary he contrived

occasionally to make her little presents, and certainly he visited no place or person more regularly or more frequently than he did the humble abode of his sister. Not that he went much anywhere, for he well knew that eminence in the path he had marked out to pursue could not be achieved unless by an incessant and persevering study, which has destroyed more men than it has ever made great.

Lotte knew of his devotion to his task—how he sat poring over dreadfully dry books, lighted in his task by the midnight oil, and supported in his trying work by the noble hope that he should be able some day to keep her like a lady.

How dearly she loved him for it, no one could know but herself; and, in addition, she thought him the cleverest lawyer in existence, much worthier in respect of merit to preside over the bench of judges than the Lord Chief Justice himself.

Therefore when she mentioned to Flora that he was a lawyer, she fully expected to see her leap with delight, and she felt disappointed that she did not.

In order to prove his incontestable superiority, she, in rapid terms, explained to him what had occurred, and begged him to display the legal knowledge which she was sure he possessed, by ordering Mr. Nutty to quit the premises instant, and to consider himself fortunate if he did so without receiving that shaking to which she fully believed he was entitled.

Charley smiled and shook his head.

But such was the influence of Flora's loveliness on him, that, after one careful perusal of her fair lineaments, he needed no urging from his sister to render assistance if he could. He did not ask himself whether his exertions would be made in a deserving cause ; he knew they would be performed on behalf of one possessing rare personal attractions, and under his first impressions that sufficed.

He commenced action by questioning Mr. Nutty, who exhibited most restive indications under examination. Charley demanded to see the warrant under which Mr. Nutty held possession, which Mr. Nutty refused, but, under the bewildering, sharp, quick, and pertinent questions of the young lawyer, he let slip the fact that Mr. Jukes had gone away without lodging it with him.

"You are not certain that Mr. Jukes has it, I dare be sworn!" cried Charley, looking at him, fixedly.

"Oh yes, I am— I'll swear that!"

"You will?"

"Take my oath on it. I seed it in his hand, when he made the seizure, and he ort to a gev' it me afore he went away."

"But he did not!"

"No ; he was so okkepied with his prisoner that he took it with him."

"Then you must go after him!"

"No, thank you."

"Yes, you must! You have no warrant you know, therefore, you are *not* in *possession*. In point of fact

and of law—you are guilty of an act of trespass. You had better go.”

“Shan’t budge a hinch.”

“Then I shall make you! If you resist, I will fling you over the banisters to the passage below!”

“Do not hurt him too much!” interposed Lotte, with a half-frightened look.

“Not if he goes quietly—but out he must go!”

“If you uses violence, I’ll have the lor on you!” cried Nutty, in evident terror.

“I shall only use the proper force to put you into the street, and, unless you at once disappear, I warn you you must take the consequences of the false position in which you know, as well as I do, your employer, through his negligence, has placed you.”

“Ain’t a’going!” cried Nutty, folding his arms, and placing his back against the wall.

“Very well,” said Charley, “that is a point we have to determine.”

He caught Mr. Nutty firmly by the wrist, and then giving his own hand an overturn, and Mr. Nutty’s an underturn, he, with his left hand seized him by his collar, and drew him at a rapid rate towards the door.

Mr. Nutty uttered a yell.

“Yah!” he cried, “le’go my arm, your’e dexlycatin’ on it.”

Charley, however, heeded him not, but put him outside the door on to the landing. The man in possession was thus no longer entitled to his cognomen.

CHAPTER IV.

Would'st thou do such a deed for all the world ?

Why, would not you ?

No, by this heavenly light !

* * * * *

By my troth, I think I should.

SHAKSPERE.

THE FORGERY.

CHARLEY had barely re-entered the room when Mr. Jukes burst into it with a sudden crash, followed by Sudds and Nutty. A noisy and angry colloquy instantly ensued, but Charley was too well acquainted with the character of the men he had to deal with either to permit himself to be bullied or browbeaten, and he had no intention that they should maintain their standing upon illegal documents.

Authorised by Flora Wilton, and in the name of her father, he demanded to see the warrant of execution upon the goods. Jukes refused ; he had come back to take them away, and had a van at the door for that purpose. Charley, however, would on no account allow this. He defied Jukes to remove the furniture until the proper return had been made to the sheriff, or until

the claims of the landlord had been satisfied. He interposed other legal objections, and raised points of a technical description on the face of the warrant, which Jukes had at length produced, until even that astute personage became mystified, and consented to leave things in *statu quo* until the morning, when, having obtained advice from the solicitor by whom he had been employed, he should be prepared to act with more determined vigour than now.

It must be borne in mind that Mr. Jukes had been promised a handsome remuneration if he succeeded in obtaining old Wilton's signature to a document confessed to be of great importance, and he knew that it was not exactly his best course to act in such a manner as to drive the man frenzied with rage by the harsh and heartless proceedings he was instructed to take. He was well aware that a strong pressure must be applied to bring the obstinate old gold-chaser to compliance with the demand now made upon him, but he was also shrewd enough to surmise that an overpressure would have the contrary effect to that desired, and, instead of disposing old Wilton to sign, would render him more firmly than ever fixed on his refusal.

The warrant was, therefore, with due ceremony, handed to Mr. Nutty, and he was instructed to remain until either the claim, under which possession was held, had been paid, or he was directed to quit. He received it with a grim smile of satisfaction, and prepared to go on with his inventory with an inflexible resolve that

the most treasured article of affection should not after this escape being recorded in his list.

But even now things were not to remain as thus arranged. The door of the apartment, which had been closed, was once more unceremoniously thrown open.

An old man, with a shrivelled face of a deep turmeric hue, as if the yellow jaundice had been for years his favourite complaint, stalked rather than walked into the room. He was a singular-looking man, with a certain peculiarity in his mien which would prevent the possibility of his going anywhere in society without his being stared at. He wore a violet-coloured cloth frock coat, a buff waistcoat, as yellow as his own face, and chocolate trousers, almost tight enough to be pantaloons; upon his feet, which were small, were polished boots, and upon his head a bright, black, carefully brushed beaver hat, very much turned up at the brim.

He was followed by a small man, dressed all in black, save his cravat; his whiskers and his hair were

White with the whiteness of what is dead,

and formed a strange contrast to his garb.

The yellow-visaged old gentleman, on gaining the middle of the room, turned a pair of jet black, brilliant eyes upon Mr. Jukes and smiled, not auspiciously but cynically, and yet triumphantly.

"The wrong room?" ejaculated Mr. Jukes, suggestively.

"Not at all," replied the old man, exhibiting a row of teeth, which appeared ghastly in that golden visage. "My name is Nathan Gomer; this house is mine; I am the landlord, and my claim upon the contents of these apartments takes precedence of yours. I think it does—I say I believe it does."

"If you *are* the landlord?" said Mr. Jukes, eyeing him doubtfully.

"I can prove that, Jukes," said the owner of the white whiskers. "You know me, Jukes?"

"I do, Mr. Graba," responded Jukes.

"I am Mr. Gomer's agent."

"And a sworn broker," added Nathan Gomer. "Not less than one hundred pounds is owing to me for rent."

"For how long?" asked Jukes.

"Twelve months," replied Nathan Gomer. "Mr. Wilton rented the whole house, and has not paid me the last year's rent. There is not more than enough here to satisfy my claim. I think so—I say I believe there is not."

"There isn't," gruffly muttered Jukes.

"Produce your warrant of execution upon these goods, Mr. Graba!" said Mr. Nathan Gomer. "I think you'll find it formal and proper."

"P'raps *you'd* like to look at it?" said Mr. Jukes to Charley.

"I should," he answered; "give it to me."

Nathan Gomer looked at him with inquiring eyes,

and watched him read every word in the document with careful attention from the first to the last.

When he had ended his perusal, Nathan Gomer smiled.

"Nothing informal or contrary to law there?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing!" said Charley with a sigh.

"This is dreadful!" murmured Lotte.

Flora, however, was not further distressed—at least she displayed no additional grief at this new incident. She had, in fact, been so stunned and overwhelmed by the first event of the morning—that which involved the compulsory absence of her father—that any circumstance of a minor description could neither add to nor diminish her sorrow.

Nathan Gomer turned to Mr. Jukes.

"You can go," he said "and you may take your myrmidons with you."

"And return the writ to the sheriff with nully bony on it, I s'pose?" exclaimed Mr. Jukes, chagrined.

"Whatever you please," returned Nathan; "my name, if it suits you."

"No thank ye. Your name will be handed in to Messrs. Squeege and Drain, solicitors, Old Jewry," replied Jukes, with a most significant nod of the head, which implied a threat.

"That will do as well," said Nathan; "they know me; they stand indebted to me in a good round sum."

The nether jaw of Jukes slightly dropped; he gave

a steadfast look at Nathan Gomer; his eyes then slowly ran round the room, and settled on Flora, who, pale as marble, stood as though she were in a trance, all unconscious of what was passing around her. He gazed at her thoughtfully for a moment. A sudden flash illumined his eyes, indicating that a new idea had taken possession of him, and then he turned to his followers and said—

“Now then, Sudds; come along, Nutty, Good day, Mr. Gomer; it’s your turn this time.”

“Good day—good day, Jukes—as you say, I think it is my turn this time—I believe I may say it *is* my turn this time,” answered Nathan, rubbing his hands.

Mr. Jukes hastened out of the room, closely attended by his satellites, Nutty looking especially chop-fallen, as his possession money would in all probability be returned “nully bony” as well as the writ.

When these men had fairly slammed the street-door after them, and the sound had risen up through the house, Nathan Gomer, who had listened attentively for it, surveyed the persons of both Charley and Lotte, and then addressing Flora, said—

“Miss Wilton, are these young persons friends of yours?”

Flora, upon hearing her name, started and slightly shuddered, as one rousing from a painful reverie: Lotte gave her no time to answer, for she said hastily—

“Oh, yes, sir; new friends, it is true; but not the less, disposed warmly to serve her in her present

terrible affliction, so far as our humble means will permit."

"And pray what are your means?" demanded Nathan.

Lotte for a moment hung her head, and a bright flush mounted to her cheek and forehead, then she flung up her face, and with her clear bright eyes looked steadfastly at the little old man with the golden visage.

In a few rapid words she sketched the position of herself and her brother, and the bright, youthful, sanguine hopes they both entertained of their future.

"Bravo Lotte—well said, my pet!" cried Charley, patting her affectionately and approvingly upon the shoulder. "And as for what I can do, why somehow I'll see you through it; a book or two less, and a——" dinner, he was about to say, but he checked himself and substituted—"a pleasure the fewer I sha'n't miss, and I would not forego the happiness of witnessing your gratification at being able to serve a friend in distress, for something far beyond such sacrifices as those.

"Bah!" cried Nathan Gomer to Lotte. "Your eighteen-pence a day, for eighteen hours at cap-front making"—

"Two shillings sometimes!" she interposed, boastfully.

"Two shillings always, if you will," continued Nathan, "gives you no margin for doing anything but starving and slaving, if you pay your way—and you, my friend" he added, turning to Charley, "if you

have made up your mind to achieve to the bar, have not a farthing to waste upon even the luxury of seeing your sister destroy herself, in an attempt to accomplish a feat which is not only impracticable, but impossible. No, no; go on as you have been going on, and let us see what time will bring forth." He paused, and then after running his eye over the warrant, he addressed Flora, saying—"Miss Wilton, I place this warrant in your keeping—impressing upon you that you must always have it in your possession in safe custody, except when you leave home for a short time, then you must entrust it to some friend who will hold it here until your return. So long as you do this, no person like Jukes can disturb or remove your furniture. You will keep it until you see me again, or until you hear from me. I am a stranger to you, not prepossessing in my appearance, but I am not quite so hard-hearted as I have been represented to be, nor quite so selfish in my nature as you may hereafter be led to believe. Now mark what I say. You have been left in a position of great trust in the midst of a heavy calamity; much will be demanded of your energy and self-reliance; remember 'God helps those who help themselves', therefore, while you are grateful for, place no reliance in, promises. Farewell!—we shall meet again. May it be when you will not need my assistance!"

With a wave of the hand, he hurried out of the room, closely followed by Mr. Graba, leaving Flora, no less than Lotte, in a state of bewildered astonishment.

Neither of the girls had seen Nathan Gomer before,

and his sudden appearance, together with the power he had assumed, and the kindness, which in a cold abrupt manner he had displayed, completely astounded them; they knew not what to make of it, nor, so far as Lotte was concerned, how to talk enough about it.

But though she talked briskly, she acted smartly, and rousing Flora into action, proceeded to "put things straight," and to render the aspect of the place pretty much what it had been before Mr. Jukes made his most unwelcome appearance.

Leaving her and Flora to the task to which they had devoted themselves, let us follow the movements of Nathan Gomer.

He stood alone at the door of Mr. Grahame in the Regent's Park, very shortly after he had quitted Wilton's residence, and he sent in his card, in a rather peremptory manner, by the same individual who had announced Mr. Chewkle. He took no heed of the representations made to him that—

"Mr. Grahame were engaged, and when he were engaged, his instructions was that no person should be admitted to interrupt him."

"Give him my card—he'll see *me*," said Nathan, emphatically. "If you refuse," he added, as the man hesitated, "I will walk up into the library where you say he is engaged with some one, and obtain your dismissal by acquainting your master with your refusal to announce me."

There was something in the manner of Nathan that

Whelks, the head footman, did not approve of, especially as he felt himself overawed by it, in spite of the affront to which he was called upon to submit. It was evident that in the eyes of the little visitor his importance was sadly underrated, and that he should have to put in his pocket the threat of dismissal which had been held out to him, and which, though he turned his nose up at it, caused him to take the card and proceed into the library, as the word "*forgery*" issued from his master's lips.

He took no heed of it, for his mind was filled with Nathan Gomer—not favourably.

"Sir! he exclaimed, in the affected strain he usually adopted when addressing his master, "ther is a pesson below"——

"How dare you, scoundrel, intrude, when I am especially and privately engaged with any gentleman?" cried Mr. Grahame, leaping to his feet and speaking passionately, while his eyes sparkled with fury.

Whelks started back, and his wig sent up a small cloud of flour. He was so startled by the sudden action of Mr. Grahame, that he could hear his own heart beat against his ribs.

"I ask pardon, sir," he faltered out, "but the pesson below"——

"Curse the person below!" cried Mr. Grahame, forgetting in his rage that dignified pride which never permitted an ebullition of anger.

Whelks heartily echoed the sentiment, but dared not so express himself—he only bowed affirmatively.

“Have I not repeatedly told you, sir,” continued Mr. Grahame, sternly, “that I will only be seen by those of whom I have some knowledge, or whom I desire to see? Another infringement of my order, and you shall be summarily dismissed.”

It struck Whelks that his master spoke in much the same strain when he saw Chewkle; he, therefore, handed to him Nathan’s card.

Mr. Grahame snatched the card from the salver, on which Whelks presented it, and on reading it, passed his hand over his face to hide any emotion which might betray itself. He sank down into his chair, and laid himself back, plunged in intense thought. Then he looked at the card, and appeared to read it a dozen times. At length he turned to Whelks, and said—

“Go! say I shall be happy to have the honour of receiving this gentleman.”

Whelks, with an expression of surprise on a countenance incapable of displaying any very distinct phase of emotion, descended to the hall to obey his commands.

“Mr. Chewkle,” said Mr. Grahame, when Whelks had disappeared, “may I ask you to favour me by stepping into this chamber for a few minutes? My visitor—a very wealthy and distinguished person, I assure you—will not detain me long, and then I shall have the pleasure of renewing our important conversation.”

Mr. Chewkle expressed his happiness at having

the opportunity of obliging Mr. Grahame in any fashion, and promptly dived into a small room overlooking the park, and connected with the library. He heard Mr. Grahame lock the door, securing him in his little retreat, but he carefully placed his ear to the keyhole, in anticipation of picking up something worth hearing and retaining—if he was paid handsomely for secrecy.

Mr. Grahame had scarcely resumed his seat when Nathan Gomer entered the library. He returned the bow, graciously performed, with which he was greeted, and placing his hat and gloves upon a chair, seated himself upon another, and commenced speaking in rather a louder key than Mr. Grahame thought quite desirable.

“Mr. Grahame,” he began, “we have not met before, but you are not unacquainted with my name.”

“Oh, dear no—of course it is most familiar to me,” observed Mr. Grahame.

“Or my money?” continued Nathan Gomer.

“Assuredly not,” returned Mr. Grahame, a little confused.

“You have made me fresh proposals?”

“For a short term—I hope you understand that!”

“Quite so. But I want to know upon what foundation you base your expectation of returning the sums demanded?”

“The whole, sole, entire possession of an enormous property; vast estates, yielding a splendid income, and

a very considerable amount in cash, the accumulation of years."

"It is in Chancery!"

"It is."

"A link is wanting, I think, to perfect your claim?"

"Ah! my dear sir, a mere nothing—such as it is, we are prepared to supply it."

"Ah! You are, eh?"

"Oh, certainly."

"You are quite clear about that?"

"Nothing was ever more certain."

"Hem! That is satisfactory, to be sure; but stay, is there not another person who has something to do with it?—one—one—dear me, what is his name!—one—Pshaw! how absurd in me to forget it."

"I know of no person, save myself, Mr. Gomer, who has the shadow of a claim to any portion of it."

"Indeed!"

"Not a soul!"

"Then I have been misinformed. I was given to understand that a person named—named—I do not often forget names—cannot you help me, Mr. Grahame, to the name of the individual who claims the property of which you have spoken, as well as you?"

"Who?—I, sir—no."

This was said with an air of offended dignity, and the manner of a man who, having made a positive assertion, sees that it is doubted, and wishes it to be thought that the incredulity is unjust.

The glittering eye of Nathan Gomer seemed to play over every feature of Mr. Grahame's countenance. Suddenly he said, with startling abruptness—

“Ah! I remember it. I have it. Wilton is the name. Wilton, who follows the occupation of a gold-plate chaser. Has he not a claim—also wanting a link—to this property?”

It might have been fancy, but the sound of a whistle appeared to issue from the vicinity of a key-hole in the door of the ante-chamber overlooking the park.

“Wilton! Wilton!” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, assuming an air of reflection, to hide his embarrassment. “Wilton! no, oh no! I know nothing of any such claim.”

“You do not!”

“No.”

“Nor the man himself?”

“No.”

“A gold-worker, living in Clerkenwell?”

“Certainly not. Where is Clerkenwell?”

“Hem! ugh! ugh!”

Nathan Gomer was seized with a cough. He rose up, took his hat and gloves, and put them on with slow precision.

His glittering eye once more perused every feature in Mr. Grahame's face.

“Mr. Grahame,” he said, slowly, “you shall hear from me.”

“Thank you, thank you, my dear sir,” replied Mr.

Grahame, rubbing his hands. "Let me hope in a manner agreeable to my wishes and in accordance with your known liberality."

"It will be one of two things, Mr. Grahame: either to comply with your proposition, or to issue process for the recovery of the money now due by you to me. Good morning, Mr. Grahame!"

He seemed to glide out of the room down the staircase, and presented himself at the elbow of Whelks, before that personage had any conception that his services were required to show out the "little yellow objek, which," he was just informing the hall-porter, he had a few minutes before shown "in to the libree."

In a sharp, shrill, tone, Nathan requested to be let out, and Whelks, taking upon himself the duty of the inert porter, threw open the street-door wide, and closed it with a loud bang, thankful, he knew not wherefore, that the "yaller objek" was out of the house.

Mr. Grahame looked after Nathan as he moved rapidly but noiselessly down the stairs, and returned into the library, feeling that the interview had been of a very unsatisfactory character. He experienced an uneasy impression with respect to the inquiries made by Nathan Gomer respecting Wilton. He cursed the name of the old gold-chaser; but for him he might be in secure possession of the wealth he coveted, and which—there was no disguising it—he imperatively needed. The man's obstinacy, while it did not benefit himself, was very likely to send him, Grahame, headlong to

ruin for want of—what? Only a signature—a simple signature.

Ah! Chewkle's suggestion flashed through his brain. It was but to attach a name to a bond: who would know that he had done it but Chewkle? and would not money buy any man's tongue? With Chewkle's aid it might be done.

Who else could know it?

Wilton, starving, dying, in prison, shattered by grief, want, and toil; his children outcasts in the streets, driven, perhaps, into dens of infamy, how could they prosecute a claim against him? If they did, should he not have the wealth to defeat every such attempt? could he not buy off or suborn all witnesses against him? The possessions and the money he should acquire by that single signature would enable him to cope with the most greedy demands for bearing false witness. Shallow reasoning enough, but conclusive in his eyes.

His train of thought having conducted him to this point, the fact that he had Chewkle locked up in the small ante-chamber overlooking the park, presented itself. Had the man overheard what had transpired between him and Nathan Gomer? A flush of heat crossed his brow at the supposition. For the moment he forgot all the dictates of his pride, lost utterly his austere bearing, and crept on tip-toe to the door of the little chamber. He softly removed the key, and peered through the keyhole, but without catching sight of Mr. Chewkle.

He replaced the key without a sound, and turning the well-oiled lock noiselessly, he flung the door open suddenly.

Mr. Chewkle, with his arms folded, was standing in a contemplative attitude, gazing out of the window, and watching the sportive movements of some wild fowl upon the lake.

“Hem! a—Mr. Chewkle, I am at liberty now!” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, recovering his pompous manner, and feeling convinced that his conference with Nathan Gomer had not been overheard by the commission agent.

Mr. Chewkle professed himself to be quite ready to proceed to business, and begged Mr. Grahame, when he made apologies for detaining him while he transacted important matters, “not to mention it.” Indeed, there was no necessity, as Chewkle’s quick ear, applied in the right place, had heard every word that passed.

“And so the poor old fool, Wilton, continues obstinate, does he?” exclaimed Grahame to Chewkle, when they were both seated.

“’Ard as hadamant,” returned Mr. Chewkle.

“He is only doing himself harm,” suggested Mr. Grahame.

“And nobody else no good,” added Chewkle.

“He certainly is not acting in a manner to entitle him to consideration,” observed Mr. Grahame, reflectively.

“Not a bit of it,” responded Mr. Chewkle; “nothen is to be got out of ’is sort; you may as well try to get

butter out o' flint; so if I was you, sir, I should just say nothen to anybody—but me—and go an' do it at once—now's a good time—by-and-by never comes."

Mr. Grahame grew cold and white, and his teeth chattered.

FORGERY!

It was a tremendous act.

The punishment, penal servitude for life.

How the words rang in his ears!

A moment more, and the threat of Nathan Gomer boomed through his brain like the minute guns of a ship of war announcing an approaching execution. "Issue process for the recovery of the money now due."

He shivered as though he had come out of a cold spring bath.

He placed his trembling fingers upon the handle of a drawer, and opened it. He turned over some papers, and drew forth a letter. It bore the signature, "E. Wilton," in a bold hand.

"There is his handwriting," he said to Chewkle, in a hoarse voice, and with a sickly smile.

"Bless my wig!" said Mr. Chewkle, as he gazed on it with admiring eyes. "A prime clear sort of writing."

He drew from his pocket a parchment.

"What is that?" inquired Mr. Grahame, with chattering teeth.

"*The deed that Wilton wouldn't sign,*" responded Chewkle. "Have you got a piece of thin paper?" he asked.

Mr. Grahame, with a beating heart and trembling hand, gave him half a sheet of thin post.

“That will just do,” he said.

He then put his hand into his side pocket and produced a small phial containing a thin fluid with a pink tinge; he produced a camel-hair pencil, and, steeping it in the liquid, painted over the back of that portion of the note which contained the signature of Wilton. Mr. Grahame, with eyes starting out of their sockets, watched him without breathing. After waiting for a minute, he examined Wilton’s sign-manual carefully, and then laying it upon the thin paper which he had previously damped, he slightly burnished the back, and there appeared upon the thin paper the signature of Wilton reversed. This he, in turn, laid upon the deed, on the place for the name of the person signing the deed to appear, and again using the burnisher with more firmness, he reproduced, though somewhat faintly, the name of Wilton upon the deed.

“Now,” said he to Mr. Grahame, “there it is; you have only to mark over it carefully, and the name will be there with such exactness the man himself couldn’t swear it wasn’t his’n.”

“You do it, my good friend Chewkle—you take the pen and write over it,” gasped Grahame, convulsively.

“Oh, no, I beg your pardon, I think I’ve done a good deal. The winnings will be yourn, and yourn must be the venter.”

“But my hand trembles so.”

“Well, ring for a little brandy—that will put you to rights.”

“No, no, I cannot do it!”

“Very good. You know the consequences o’ not doin’ it best, you know.”

“Give me the pen!”

“That’s it—mind, gently does it!” advised Mr. Chewkle. “’Old your pen ’ard with your thum’ and press it against your middle finger top, and then you’ll mark it firmly. Steady she goes—that’s it—beautiful! Dot that *hi—l, t, o, n*—good! Now for that little bit o’ flourish—that’s it—it’s done, an’ capitally you’ve done the FORGERY!”

Mr. Grahame uttered a groan, and sank back in his chair. Mr. Chewkle caught him with a sudden grip by the wrist.

“It is a dreadful secret I have of yourn,” he growled, “let me ’int to you that you’ll have to be generous to me to make me keep it dark.”

“Man! witness of my infamy, your most avaricious wishes shall be gratified,” hissed Mr. Grahame through his teeth. “You have only to be silent.”

“As the grave,” said Chewkle, placing his finger to his lip.

Suddenly Mr. Grahame uttered a shout of horror: his eye fell upon Nathan Gomer, who, a few paces from him, was standing watching him attentively.

“My God! Mr. Gomer—how—what—why are you here?” he exclaimed, gasping for breath.

Chewkle, in an instant, spread a newspaper, which was on the table, over the deed.

“Do not alarm yourself, Mr. Grahame,” replied Nathan Gomer, with the coolest self-possession. “I merely returned to say, after a brief reflection, that I have decided on entertaining your proposals. You had better, therefore, put your solicitor in connection with mine. Good morning, Mr. Grahame.”

Nathan’s eye glittered on Chewkle for an instant, so as to make that person feel most uncomfortable. Then he moved swiftly and noiselessly out of the room.

Mr. Grahame, pale as death, sank back in his chair.

Mr. Chewkle gazed in the direction which Nathan Gomer had taken, and ejaculated—

“Well, I’m blowed !”

CHAPTER V.

The wild confusion, and the swarthy glow
Of flames on high, and torches from below;
The shriek of terror and the mingling yell.

* * * * *

He climbs the crackling stair—he bursts the door,
Nor feels his feet glow, scorching with the floor;
His breath choked, gasping with the volumed smoke,
But still from room to room his way he broke.

BYRON.

THE CONFLAGRATION.

THE events of the morning in which he had taken so prominent a part presented to Hal Vivian, when alone in his chamber, that evening, rather a wide field for contemplation. He was glad of the opportunity which the close of the day's labour gave him to retire to the solitude of his neatly furnished bedroom, because, unobserved, he could there review the circumstances which had that day occurred, and give to them the colouring most agreeable to the feelings which had recently taken possession of him.

He threw himself into an easy chair, and was quickly engaged in drawing deductions. Not for a second was

the fair face of Flora absent from his vision. The rugged visage of Jukes, the grimy features of his satellites, the impassible countenance of Nathan Gomer, which seemed moulded out of fine gold, the bright, frank aspect of Lotte, by turns floated across his mental speculum, but never to displace that of Flora.

Out of the past a future was to be formed ; he tried to construct it, and in doing so set himself honestly to work to examine those feelings which prompted him so strongly to undertake the task.

He sought to understand why he should interest himself at all in the affairs of the old gold-worker ; what motives should have induced him to interfere and take part in what had happened that morning, or why he should be so very eager to effect certain happy results he had in contemplation, and the answer which constantly presented itself to these and other questions was—Flora Wilton!

Hal Vivian was just out of his time ; but a few days, and his—

Seven long years were out.

He was at that age in man when love partakes very strongly of the imaginative, and clothes the object of affection with an excellence and perfection which, though it be not always just, makes her whom he loves to him a *beau idéal*. Almost every youth creates in his mind a standard of perfect loveliness, and if he, perchance, meets with a face which presents some resemblance to the mental image he has formed, he at once proceeds

to invest it with all the charms with which he has endowed the unreal. The maid is elected to the first place in his heart—she becomes his guiding influence—he busies himself by contemplating schemes of impossible delights for her, is anxious to be at her side whenever apart, and most loth, when with her, to tear himself from her.

No doubt a very considerable amount of mental deception is practised during this phase of youthful existence, and when marriage has bestowed upon the lovesick swain the object he has so ardently coveted, he perhaps finds that he has been gazing through, what he now considers, the wrong end of the telescope.

Harry Vivian was, however, like all youths of his age, in no condition to believe that the being he had made his representative angel could ever prove the reverse. He had always seen her mild and gentle, soft in manner, courteous in speech, amiable in expression, and exquisitely lovely in person. He could suppose no other side to the picture, and so, as she outwardly resembled an angel, he gave her credit for being inwardly a saint. His intimacy with her was slight, his opportunities of seeing her—save during the past year, when he had made them—had not been many; he had interchanged but few words with her, and they were of a very commonplace description. He had not hitherto thought of her, more than that she was a girl of rare and delicate beauty, whose features he should

like to reproduce in some of the choice modellings of the precious metals entrusted to him, for it seemed to him that no artist, however marvellous his skill in delineating the female face divine, had ever succeeded in producing one so beautiful as her's.

Love had, however, taken no part in this admiration; he had gazed upon her and thought of her as he would have done of the best efforts of the greatest masters of art—"a thing of beauty," but animated with life. Her sudden appearance at the window, the golden sunbeams falling on her face, her hair, her light dress, bringing her beauty out in strong relief from the dark chamber in which she stood, altered at one stroke the condition of his feelings.

Passion sprang into life simultaneously with the glance he turned upon her—it intermingled with his admiration, and became love.

He was not conscious of the change wrought within him when he instinctively surmised that trouble and trial hovered over her, and that he should take an active part in endeavouring to avert it. He had not a notion of it even when seated with Mr. Harper, his uncle, discoursing on the position of the Wilton family, he employed himself devising how the all but orphaned child of their skilled workman might be rescued from destitution.

Here, in his chamber, alone in deep meditation and self-examination, it flashed through his mind. A sudden glow of heat pervaded his frame, and he sprang to his

feet impulsively—a strange tremor thrilled through him—a feeling of apprehension crept over him—and a species of sadness oppressed him ; wherefore, he could not comprehend. Here was food for contemplation, indeed ; and he resumed his seat to pursue this new subject through its many ramifications until he should arrive at some kind of ultimate result.

One fact followed from this discovery made by him. Up to this moment he had been, in his knowledge of the world, a mere boy. He was, at a moment, transformed into a man.

He had “something to love,” and the affection was not of the same nature as that entertained for kith or kin. He had taken up a responsibility, and at once there was something to live for, work for, seek for, and to win. Fame, wealth, honour, were now worth striving to gain, because there was one, whose approbation he coveted, to share the wealth and honour to be secured by persevering energy and untiring ardour.

In commencing his struggle with the world, here was an incentive to ambition beyond a mere love of art or the desire to excel, and a motive for reaping golden opinions beyond the common wish to become rich.

It is true there was nothing in Flora’s manner to lead him to believe that he had created any such impression upon her as she had upon him, and the probabilities were that she did not see him in any other light than as a gentlemanly and good-hearted young man, who had been kind and considerate to her father in business, and

singularly generous and friendly to her in her moment of trial. All this he quite understood ; and, though he felt himself over head and ears in love with her, he did not deceive himself into any other notion than that to win her love his work was yet to commence, to be prosecuted with faithful perseverance, and in an honorable and unselfish spirit.

As true love looks to marriage as its goal, so did that possessed by Hal ; but romantic, generous, and noble-hearted as he was by nature, he had yet so much of the common leaven in him that it struck him it would be worth consideration to ascertain into what kind of family he should introduce himself by an alliance with Miss Wilton.

His own position was very soon determined. He was the son of a deceased sister of Mr. Harper, the goldsmith—was apprenticed to him, and would, in all probability, be his heir, as his only son had turned out wild in his youth, and had, after the commission of some outrageous piece of profligacy, disappeared. It was supposed he had fled to India, but from his departure to the present hour he had not been heard of.

Mr. Harper had mentioned to Hal an intention that he had formed, of taking him into partnership with him, but he had decided first on subjecting him to a probation of a year or two, to try whether the promise of steadiness and sobriety, which his youth had given, would be realised.

Hal's future might, consequently, be said to be formed for him ; and it was into his uncle's family he should introduce Miss Wilton as his wife, if ever the union took place. Therefore, while considering his own happiness, he felt it to be his duty not to overlook that of his uncle, who had behaved to him from his infancy as a tender, just, and generous father. It would be a task he should impose upon himself, to ascertain, as far as possible, the previous history of old Wilton. Not that he feared the result would turn out other than he could wish, but he could not conceal from himself that there was a mystery hanging over the old worker in gold, which it would be proper, if possible, to penetrate.

Some years back Wilton had suddenly presented himself at the shop of Mr. Harper for employment in carving in gold. Inquiries elicited that he had not been bred to the business he professed, but was what might be termed a scientific amateur. Mr. Harper was struck by his language, and by his remarks upon the processes and art of modelling and chasing ; and being much pressed at the time with an excess of business, he entrusted him with some valuable work—the more readily when he found that old Wilton resided exactly opposite to him.

Wilton returned with his task accomplished in a manner greatly to Mr. Harper's satisfaction, and from that time he had been employed by him. He always executed his work excellently, but he was not

always punctual, and twice or thrice Mr. Harper, in anger, had threatened to discontinue employing him; but Wilton generally contrived to smooth away his irritation, and they went on as before.

Nothing was known of him—whence, or when, or how, he came; he seldom went out, and only worked for Mr. Harper. So much Hal knew—no one knew more—and yet they do know a good deal about each other in Clerkenwell. Hal resolved now that his knowledge should not sleep here, although at the present moment he could not see quite clearly his way to learn more.

His future cogitations were terminated by a call to supper, and that meal being discussed, he retired to rest—to think again, as before, and to fall into a deep, heavy slumber.

He dreamed.

He thought he met with Flora in some leafy coppice and in secret, and that, while conversing with her in a strain of loving tenderness, they were interrupted by the tramp of a body of persons approaching. He fancied that he seized Flora in his arms, and fled with her, but was pursued, and that his pursuers shouted and uttered fierce threats. He looked back, and saw that old Wilton headed Jukes and his followers, as well as Nathan Gomer and his uncle, who seemed to be the most excited of the party, and called him by name loudly. Then, as he still fled, he observed that his pursuers were armed, and he heard his uncle call to them to fire upon him.

He fled on; still his uncle's voice shouted in his ear—

“Fire! fire! fire!”

At last he sprang up in his bed, suddenly awakened, and still the voice vehemently cried—

“Fire! fire! fire!”

A heavy hand beat violently against the panels of his chamber-door, and completely aroused him.

He at once leaped to the floor, and unlocked his door. He found his uncle without, in a state of great excitement—he was half-dressed.

“Oh, Lord!” he cried; “I thought you would never wake; there is a fire; throw on your clothes, Hal, my boy!”

“A fire! where?” asked Hal, hastily.

“Over the way,” returned Mr. Harper; “be quick! while I pacify your aunt, who is frightened to death.”

He lit Hal's candle as he spoke, and shuffled hastily away in his slippers.

Over the way! Why Wilton's house was over the way. Hal felt his blood rush violently through his veins. Over the way! What if it should be there? He drew on his clothes with hasty swiftness, and he heard the low, hoarse sounds of a gathering mob in the streets. The tramp of running feet, the violent knocking at doors, and the shouts of boys and men crying “Fire!”

All that was absolutely essential to wear, but nothing that would impede his activity or application of strength,

did Hal put on, and then he hurried to one of the front windows of the house and looked out.

It is impossible to describe the sudden and violent shock that ran through his frame. Though he had thought it possible, he had not believed it probable that it could be Wilton's abode which was on fire, yet his first glance told him that the lower part of that house was in flames.

A mob had gathered round ; an active policeman was pushing it about to clear the way for the inhabitants to bring out their furniture from the burning house—that is, if they had a chance to do aught beyond saving their lives.

The door of the house was open, and volumes of smoke were pouring forth. A dull red flame, throwing a ruby glare, was to be seen gleaming through the windows of the kitchen and the parlour. The upper part of the house seemed lost in wreathing dull, gray, cloudy masses of vapour, which rolled up from the seat of the fire.

Rising up above the hoarse roar of the assembled mob, came the shouts of those who were on their way with the first engine. It seemed to be the herald of succour, but, alas! it was only the parish-engine, brought up by an energetic beadle, four men, and about twenty dirty ragged boys.

The turncock arrived with it, and he, though able in the daylight to find the plug-hole blindfold, could not without great difficulty discover it, with his eyes briskly exercised, at night.

At length, when the parish engine, bravely foremost in the rank, was ready, a mass of volunteers sprang forward to pump it. Mr. Turncock succeeded in pulling up the plug, and saturating a dozen venturesome persons, who with engineering spirits watched the operation. The hose of the parish-engine was at once connected with the stream of water, and with a hurrah the volunteers began to work the handles of the pump, but though they were made to sound jar-jar, jar-jar, jar-jar, briskly, nothing came of it. The parish-engine, as it has ever been from the hour it was first invented to the present time, was found to be practicably useless. No water could be forced into the directing pipe to play upon the burning house.

The flames grew fiercer, the smoke denser, and crackling sounds of wood splitting, and the sputtering of sparks, were more distinctly heard.

Then there was suddenly a mighty cry from the mob.

At the upper windows appeared, shrieking for aid, the forms of two young girls. They were in their night dresses, and had evidently only just been aroused. Three or four brave young fellows rushed into the passage of the house to ascend the stairs to save them, but a sheet of flame suddenly leaped forth, and drove them back scorched. Thus victorious, it seized the staircase in its blistering embrace, and hissed and sputtered as it danced and darted upwards, cutting off with a species of savage joy all means of egress by that route.

Shouts were raised for the fire-escape, as the attempt-

ing rescuers were forced back by the blinding burst of flame into the streets, and preparations were made, if the worst came to the worst, to receive with as much safety as possible those who would be called upon to leap from the dizzy heights of the upper floor as a last desperate resort to save their otherwise doomed lives.

A distant hubbub, growing louder as it drew near, announced the approach of the fire-escape. Its advent was hailed with lusty shouts, and fifty volunteers rushed to facilitate its arrival, but impeding and retarding its progress in their meritorious desire to get it up to the scene of disaster as quickly as possible.

This was the state of things when Hal looked out of window to ascertain where the fire had broken out.

A downward glance at the rolling masses of smoke, and intermittent flashes of forked flame; an upward glance at the windows, where, huddled together, were the shrinking, weeping, distracted females, and he was the next minute in front of the house making a mad attempt to ascend the burning staircase.

The serpent-tongued fire had, however, obtained complete possession; it roared, and licked as it roared, every particle of woodwork within its reach, brightening up as if with ferocious glee as it gained strength, and sending forth showers of coruscations, sparkling and glittering, seemingly to mark as a festive occasion one of the most dreadful visitations to which human society is occasionally subjected.

Blinded and suffocated, Hal was compelled to give

back, to save the life which might yet be successfully employed in rescuing that of others.

As he reached the doorway, the fire-escape came up, the conductor placed it against the wall; but before he could commence his perilous ascent, a light, youthful figure sprang past him on to the wheel, caught in his hands the nearest rungle of the ladder, and ran lightly upwards, followed by a cheer from the mob and a shout from the conductor to come down again; for inexperience, no matter how honorably influenced, is, in most cases, a sad marplot.

In such emergencies, surrounded by frightful danger, exposed to fatal consequences by a false step or an error in judgment, the safety of valuable lives hanging upon a thread, experience allied to calmness, and cool self-reliance under the most trying contingencies, is essential to successful operation. In these cases, knowledge is indeed power. To know how to act and when to act, what to use and how to use it, with the necessary courage to do and dare all that may be required, is the battle, and victory rarely fails to follow it when it is properly conducted. It can be understood, therefore, why the conductor of the fire-escape, who had saved many lives, enraged at the act of Hal Vivian, shouted so vehemently to him to return.

He knew by many instances that such a proceeding as that of which the youth was guilty, while it imperilled the rescue of those sought to be saved, added to the number he was called upon to preserve. His

own life was always in jeopardy in the performance of his duty, to which he was quite equal, and it was vexing to find another placing himself in peril without occasion for it, and, in all probability, doing far more harm than good.

Quick as he was in his chase after Hal, he failed to reach him before he was at the window, where clustered the affrighted girls. Ere he could clutch hold of him, Hal sprang on the window-sill, and was the next instant in the room.

He was recognised immediately by those whom he came to deliver.

Flora, as she saw Hal's form upon the edge of the window, and witnessed him bound into the room, uttered a cry of joy.

As the light from the street flashed upon his animated excited countenance, her heart received upon it the impression of a face it was not likely to permit easily to be effaced.

"Heaven reward you, Mr. Vivian!" she exclaimed, hysterically, "you have come to save us."

"Or perish with you!" he replied, excitedly, "for I will not leave the room until you are all safely down."

"God bless you! God bless you!" sobbed Lotte Clinton, who, as white as death, was trembling like an aspen.

"Now then, young fellow," cried the conductor, putting his head into the window, "since you are here, you must make yourself useful, and be as cool as a

cowcumber. Recollect, we ain't here to spend a week. Shut that door ; look sharp, or you'll all be stifled in a minute."

No sooner commanded than done.

At the same instant the clattering of horses' feet at full gallop over the ringing stones, the heavy rumble of whirling wheels, the rattling cheers of a mob which was fast growing into a multitude, announced the arrival of the first practicable fire-engine.

By this time Lotte was placed within the cradle of the fire-escape, and was safely lowered down to those beneath.

A roar of gratification burst from the lips of the spectators as they beheld one added to the list of the saved.

Hal watched until Lotte was lifted out of the escape, and then he turned to Flora, to request her to be in readiness to take her place in the little life-boat.

It must be understood that these operations were performed with the utmost rapidity consistent with safety. The room was more than half filled by a dense smoke when Hal entered ; and, although the door was since closed, it had streamed in through crannies and chinks so as to fill it—the open window rather holding it in the room than suffering it to escape.

When Lotte and her companion, the conductor of the fire-escape departed, the atmosphere had become heated and stifling. It was also so thick that scarcely a thing a foot off could be distinguished. Hal's astonishment

and alarm can be imagined when, on the return of the cradle, he spoke to Flora and received no answer.

But a moment past and she was at his elbow ; she was now gone—he could not see her—he called to her, but received no reply. He felt about the room, but he was nearly suffocated, without succeeding in finding her. He heard the roaring of the flames beneath him : the smoke grew each moment thicker and denser : large drops of perspiration poured from him : instinctively he cowered to the floor and spread his hands in all directions, afraid to open his mouth for fear of being stifled.

The conductor of the fire-escape now poked his head into the window, and shouted for the pair to save their lives while they had a chance, but he received no answer.

He leaped into the room, and threw himself on the floor, groping about upon his hands and knees. He uttered a shrill cry, but met with no response. He persevered as long as he could breathe, but without meeting the bodies of either the youth or the maiden.

It was his impression that, overpowered by the smoke they had sunk senseless upon the floor, but he could nowhere find them, and at last mystified, and all but suffocated, he was compelled to retreat to the window.

The fire was at the door of the room, shooting its long forks of flame into the old wood of which it was composed, and with such intense heat, that it was quickly one mass of flame, and sputtering sparks.

With a heavy heart, the conductor got out of the room, on to his machine, and he was barely upon it, when a

long blast of flame followed him with the speed of lightning, and darted out of both windows, cracking and smashing the fragile glass panes, causing them to fly in all directions, playing fantastically over, and wreathing up the architraves of the windows, lighting up as it did so the excited faces of the swaying, yelling mob below.

The conductor slid down the escape, and communicated the appalling intelligence, that in the burning rooms above were two miserable young creatures who, by the time he was relating the occurrence, had become shapeless, blackened, charred masses of human clay.

The scene had now grown intensely exciting; more engines had arrived, and hundreds of persons were added to those already assembled. A body of policemen were employed in forcing the turbulent crowd back, so as to give the firemen room for their exertions. The street was turned into a river, and the fire brigade—accoutred like the heavy dragoons of a former period—were plashing through the muddy stream, getting their engines into working order with the systematic, and, as it appeared to the anxious gazers, the rather apathetic regularity of organised action.

Frantic occupiers of adjoining houses were flinging out their furniture—their little all, and that uninsured. The beds and chairs, tables and drawers, formed, as they were brought, or thrown, hastily into the streets, a motley jumble—some of them being borne away by

active parties, never more to be returned to the original owner.

“Two persons burned to death!” was a cry which ran through the crowd, and was again and again re-echoed by the individuals of which it was formed, a thrill of horror accompanying it wherever it went.

An explosion, and up shot a body of flame into the air, attended by a shower of sparks, fragments of burning wood, and flaming articles, the volumes of smoke, of gold and rose-blush tint rolling away, painfully contrasting with the violet-hued heavens.

The roof was gone!

A brilliant glare was thrown over all objects, far and near, making the place around as light as day.

Lo! a sudden and tremendous cry burst from the agitated multitude, pressing, crowding, and crushing upon the foot and roadways.

“There! there!—look there!” burst from a thousand throats, and as many hands pointed to a particular spot.

The adjoining house to Wilton’s—now a burning mass—had a tall, irregular, but pointed roof, as though two rooms had been built above the old roof of much less dimensions than those beneath, at the smallest possible cost, and with an utter disregard of architectural rule.

Up the jagged side of this slanting erection a human figure was observed climbing slowly, his arm encircling a form all in white. His position was terrifyingly dangerous—the least slip, and he, together with his

burden, would be precipitated into the burning ruins, still roaring, spluttering, and flaming below him.

He lay almost flat upon his face on the rough tiles, his right hand grasping the carved edge of the angle of the roof. Gradually he worked his hand upwards, and by a tremendous exertion of strength, he drew himself and his companion up a foot at each movement. It was desperate labour—a fearful struggle with death. It seemed to those who gazed upon him a mere impossibility that he could save himself and the girl whom he still clutched round the waist.

On he went slowly, the bright flames lighting him in his task, but reducing his strength by the intense heat they threw out. He succeeded in getting one leg across the angle of the roof, but in doing so he slipped back at least two feet.

A shriek of horror burst from the crowd, and rose up in the air like a death-wail.

The youth did not yet despair, but with desperate exertion he arrested his descent with his knees.

He paused but a moment, and renewed his efforts to ascend, using his knees now to enable him to maintain his position on the roof, while he elevated his body so as to extend his reach until he obtained a hold higher than before, that he might thus ultimately gain a place of comparative safety.

It was Hal Vivian who was with Flora Wilton in this frightful situation. He had crawled in search of her into an adjoining apartment to that which he had en-

tered from the street. She had hurried thither to save something to which she knew her father attached great importance, but, overpowered by the smoke, she had, after securing it, fallen senseless.

Hal fortunately found her as soon as he got into the room, and the reflection from the fire below enabled him just to see the window. He tore it open, and saw that the parapet adjoined the roof of the next house.

He sprang on to it, and commenced the perilous task of endeavouring to escape a horrible death, and of saving, with his own, a life he esteemed far more valuable.

The falling roof of the house he had just quitted, when it sank with its dreadful crash, was within an ace of taking him with it. It was a fearful moment, but he surmounted it, and attempted to proceed at the instant the crowd caught sight of him. He heard not their cry, saw nothing, thought not of aught but the endeavour to reach a place of safety with her. He strained every nerve and sinew to accomplish his object, but human endurance, though backed by the urgings and influence of a strong will, has its limits.

He now reached that point when, with sickening dismay, he found his strength failing him, and although his firmness and determination were unshaken, his power to go on was departing. To slacken his tenacious hold was to be hurled into the yawning gulph of fire behind him. He knew this well; that knowledge had as yet sustained him, and he clung to the roof still with

desperation, resolved, notwithstanding the quivering of his fingers, the agonising aching of the arm which supported Flora, and the trembling of his knees, to continue to the last his exertions to save the maiden, or to pass out of life with her.

Slowly rising up, as before, he made a clutch at the top of the roof, and caught it, but he found that, beyond drawing himself and the form of the senseless girl a little higher, he could do no more. It required an effort of unusual strength to reach the summit, where he believed he could remain safe until rescued, and that effort exhausted nature was incapable of making. Nay, he felt that he could but a few minutes longer cling there, and if some Heaven-sent aid did not reach him, his almost superhuman exertions would have been made in vain.

He remained motionless, trying to recover his spent breath, and, while in this position, the hoarse cries of the people thronging in the streets reached his ears, and seemed to rouse him from his slowly approaching listless inanition. He breathed a prayer; a thought what Flora yet might be to him, and what that great world, of which he had yet seen so little, might have in store for him, flashed through his brain. The effect upon him was like the sound of a trumpet to the soldier at the moment of some fearful charge, in which death is the alternative of glory.

He drew himself upwards, struggling with the obstacles which seemed to try and force him backwards,

and, almost with a scream upon his lips, he found himself oscillating upon the spot he had with such trying exertion sought to reach, exhausted, and unable to make another effort.

A shadow fell upon him ; he turned his feeble eyes upon the occasion of it, and saw one of the fire brigade, who, having laid a short ladder against the side of the roof, had mounted it and reached him.

Behind this man rose up the helmet of a second fireman, closely following his comrade in his work of mercy.

Hal knew at a glance that Flora and himself were saved. He no longer strove to continue the battle with fate, and did not attempt to resist the embrace of insensibility as he felt the grip of the fireman upon his collar, and heard undistinguishable words fall from him greeting him.

CHAPTER VI.

"You have deserted me; where am I now?
Not in your heart, while care weighs on your brow;
No, no! you have dismissed me, and I go
From your breast houseless; ay, ay, it must be so,"
He answered. JOHN KEATS.

THE NOBLE GUESTS.

MR. GRAHAME, though greatly agitated at the sudden appearance and abrupt disappearance of Nathan Gomer, at a moment of such dread importance, did not make any comment upon it to Mr. Chewkle. He felt unequal to such a task, and perhaps, too, he thought that it would be better not to suppose that the strange little moneyed man had either observed or suspected any foul play in the act he must have seen in commission. So he folded his arms, and remained silent, assuming the aspect of profound meditation.

Mr. Chewkle, finding the coast clear of the small enemy, would have given free vent to the feelings which were turbulent and in turmoil within him, but Mr. Grahame repressed the very first outbreak.

“Pray be silent on the matter,” he observed, hastily, as if aroused suddenly from a fit of abstraction, “our speculations upon the situation are worth nothing, and may lead us astray if suffered to have the rein. Keep what you know safely locked within your own breast. Trust the key in my keeping alone. Your reward shall not certainly be less than your expectations. Mr. Gomer doubtless saw me affixing a signature to a deed, and would presume it to be my own; he could not imagine the truth; and therefore, though startled at the moment, I do not, upon reflection, see any occasion for alarm. Let me see you again in a few days, my good friend, and in the meantime endeavour to suggest a mode of bringing that wretchedly obstinate old man, Wilton, to reason.”

Mr. Grahame rang a hand-bell sharply, and Whelks instantly was in the room. Mr. Chewkle “had a thing to say,” which had strong reference to an immediate pecuniary supply; but Mr. Grahame did not afford him the opportunity, for he addressed Whelks as he entered, and bade him escort Mr. Chewkle to the door. He tendered a finger to the commission agent as a parting salute, honoured him with a stiff bow, and retired promptly to the further end of the library.

“This way if you please!” exclaimed Whelks to Chewkle, as with head erect and shoulders back, he, with the stateliness of a Tartar soldier in an Astley’s drama, marched out of the room.

Mr. Chewkle glanced at Mr. Grahame and at

Whelks ; he had a pressing occasion for a few pounds ; but though he had quite made up his mind to ask for and have a sum, and indeed in a private self-communion on his way thither that morning, he had composed the conversation which was to take place between himself and Mr. Grahame, and which was to terminate in a princely act of munificence towards him on the part of the latter personage, he found himself sneaking out, treading tip-toe on the shadow of Whelks, without having uttered a word or having obtained a penny.

The princely act of munificence did not come off upon this occasion, but he promised himself that before long it should ; and, ere he was out of the house, he had flung his friendship for Grahame to the winds, and had carved for himself an antagonistic attitude, in which he played the part of one who, having in his possession a dreadful secret, by which the safety of another is compromised, makes money by it frequently.

As the door closed upon him, Mr. Grahame turned a fitful gaze in that direction, and quickly, but silently, turned the key in the lock.

Then he paced up and down the library, almost convulsed by a fierce, mental struggle. He pressed his burning palm upon his aching forehead, and muttered rapidly and wildly—

“It must be done now ; there is no escape—no escape—none—retreat is utterly impossible, and the advance must be swift, or, in spite of crime, utter crushing ruin must be the result. No ; there is no stopping now.

That forgery is useless, worthless, while he lives to prove it what it is. But how dispose of him without having any apparent connection with his death? Let me see! I must have no accomplice. I already have one too many; he will be a thorn in my side, I can see that; but there is time enough to think of the plan by which I shall get rid of him. But this Wilton; he must die, and that immediately. Yes, he must die! he must die! or I perish! but how to kill him—how? how?”

He threw himself in his chair, and racked his brain for a device by which to accomplish his devilish purpose without compromising himself. But as he did so, the magnitude of the crime he proposed to effect was not lost upon him. He felt that his face was livid, his hands cold and clammy, while drops of icy sweat trickled from his temples on to his cheek bones. His teeth, too, chattered, and his limbs trembled, as though he had been suddenly nipped by a frost.

Some hours elapsed before his torturing reverie terminated—even then he had only an indistinct notion of the course which he calculated upon, as the best to be adopted. The vulgar modes of knife or poison, he foresaw could not be employed by him, because he would have to be connected, however remotely, with the deed; and how to accomplish his design without the aid of one or the other, was a problem harder for him to work out than the most difficult in the “first four books” to an indifferent mathematician.

He certainly hit upon a scheme, but he was not sure that it would accomplish the object in view. There was not, however, time to project a plan, requiring consummate skill in its details, and rare ability to execute. Need was driving, and the ground was such as the devil must cover without the option of a choice; and he made up his mind to act at once, for he required immediately the funds which the successful execution of his infamous purpose would place at his disposal.

As if to sustain him in the resolution he had formed, he was aroused by the arrival of Whelks at the library door, who, when it was opened, informed him that his son had just returned home, accompanied by the Duke of St. Allborne, and the Honorable Lester Vane, and that they awaited him in the drawing-room.

Dismissing Whelks with a message to the effect that he would immediately join them, he hastened to his dressing-room, to obliterate all traces of the mental struggle he had for so many hours endured, and, making a slight alteration in his attire, he descended,

With solemn step and slow,

to welcome his son's guests upon their arrival from college.

He found, on entering the gorgeously furnished apartment, his wife and daughters entertaining the new arrivals after the manner of the House—always excepting Evangeline, who sat back in a window recess, as if she had no business there.

A few words of stately congratulation and welcome

from Mr. Grahame, and the whole party returned to the position which it occupied when he entered.

The keen eye of Mr. Grahame ran over the forms of the two young men who were thus introduced into his family for the first time, and naturally the young Duke was the first to attract his attention.

He was tall—over six feet, and stout with his height. He was fair, with round blue eyes, a small mouth, and no whiskers upon his cheeks or moustache upon his upper lip, or the sign of a hair in the vicinity.

His hands and feet were small, but there was a bulky, plethoric character about his frame, and his legs had an ungraceful leaning to knock-kneeism.

The tone of his voice was rich and not unmusical; but, like many members of the aristocracy, his tongue refused to have anything to do with the letter *r*, and, as a not unusual consequence, he used words containing that letter more frequently than did persons who could sound it like the roll of a drumstick upon a kettle-drum.

He was dressed elegantly. The jewellery he wore, though spare in quantity, was superb in material, and super-eminently costly.

The Honorable Lester Vane was of an entirely different stamp; and could, perhaps, have better sustained the character of a duke than his friend. Standing about five feet ten, he was remarkably well-formed and erect, and seemed to be at least six feet high. He was dark; and, though not a military man, wore a handsomely-shaped and trimmed moustache: his features were

regular and well-shaped: his eyes were a very dark blue, and shaded by long black eyelashes: his hair and whiskers being of the same hue as the latter. His hands were white and small, and his feet were equally neat in their proportions. He was dressed with consummate taste and care, and of all men was calculated to attract the notice of women.

Malcolm Grahame, short in stature, was a rather ugly likeness of his sister Margaret, possessing all her pride, but not enough of her studied coldness to prevent it becoming vulgar arrogance. He was rather overdressed, too; and, altogether, presented a remarkable contrast to his college companions. It was soon perceptible that he toadied them, and that they both held him at no very flattering height in their estimation.

Why, then, did they accompany him home? An answer to that question might have been found in the glances bestowed by both the young men on the beautiful Helen Grahame, who, conscious of her own charms, received the homage of their eyes as simply her due. They were both, very shortly after their introduction, aware that she interpreted their looks of admiration, rather steadfastly bestowed—that they did not surprise nor did they abash her—nay, when, to show her power, she flashed those brilliant orbs upon them by turns, with a clear, steadfast gaze, they were fain to let their eyelids fall, to screen their unsteady eyes from the direct, unfaltering look she bent upon them.

Both regarded her in the light of a prize worth

having, though each looked on the achievement from a different point of view. One seriously hoped to win it without the formulary of the wedding ring—the other with that aid, but with the addition also of a golden store.

Helen Grahame was unquestionably beautiful. The heightened colour of her cheek, the sparkling dancing of her brilliant eye, as she observed the impression her personal attractions had made upon the two young high-born men, greatly enhanced that beauty, which excited admiration even when in repose. It kept them at her side, and engrossed the largest share of their attention.

With a woman's quickness of perception, Helen saw that she should soon have both these men suitors for her favour, sighing at her feet for her love. The gracefully fashioned form of Lester Vane pleased her eye and taste—the ducal coronet of his bulky friend roused her ambition and dazzled her; and she foresaw that she should be perplexed, when, as she instinctively knew would be the case, both wooed her, which to prefer. It was something to have a handsome "Honorable" for a husband—but to be a duchess!—ah!

Why at the moment did she sigh so sharply?—why did a spasm run through her frame, and make her clutch convulsively at a chair for support? Was it that this momentary pang reminded her that in neither decision would her heart be enlisted, or that there was another and more grave consideration which rendered such a speculation a forbidden subject?

After the common-places which usually attend an introduction, Mr. Grahame suggested that the guests should be shown to their respective rooms, where they might remove the traces of their journey, and prepare their toilet for dinner, to be served at half-past eight—a suggestion which was somewhat readily accepted, and appeared to be grateful to all parties.

The Duke and the Honorable Lester Vane had heard Malcolm Grahame boast of his beautiful sister Helen and his proud sister Meg. They had availed themselves of his apparently unlimited command of money, and they considered that his family were enormously wealthy, but vulgar and common-place. When Malcolm invited them home to spend a week with him, at his “place” in London, they both, having “places” of their own in the great city, looked upon the invitation as a good joke, and accepted it in the same spirit. They each resolved to add to the favours they had bestowed upon him, by permitting him always to pay, by borrowing his money in return for their company, and by running off with the pretty sister, of whom he spoke so enthusiastically. They had even entered into a bet with each other as to which would prove successful.

They were, however, not a little surprised to find the Grahames living in a style of elegant luxury, and the members of it displaying a pride of bearing not even surpassed by the ineffably proud Somerset himself, whose wife—a Percy—never attempted the liberty of kissing him. They were equally posed to find the

pretty sister a brilliant beauty, who could only be approached with deference and humility; who was not to be gained with a glance of passion, or won by the pretended asseverations of a love having no existence.

Lester Vane saw his course at once. His income was narrow, and during his father's life would not be increased by inheritances or bequests from any branch of his family, near or remote. To gain a beautiful wife, with an enormous dowry, was precisely the means by which he purposed elevating himself to wealth, and within a few minutes after his introduction to Helen, he abandoned his criminal project, and took up the matrimonial one. He formed the determination, too, of thwarting, promptly and effectually, the Duke's designs, without appearing to do so, until he was sure of the lady, because he knew not when and how he might require his interest and service.

The young Duke was quite thrown out, too, by what was presented to his astonished eyes. Malcolm Grahame, after all, was not the *parvenu* he had fancied him to be, and his sister, instead of being merely a pretty, silly girl, was one to grace a throne. His was not a nature easily to abandon a resolution once formed, and he thought of Helen as a mistress with a gratified emotion not to be described. A passion for her was at once raised in his heart. He, too, remembering his bet with Lester Vane, made his resolutions in respect to the intentions of his friend, but as his own in that particular

remained unchanged, he decided upon preserving silence respecting it for the present.

Both the young men were therefore glad to escape to their rooms, to recover their surprise on finding themselves in an atmosphere they had not expected, and in contact with persons differing materially from the conceptions they had formed of them. They were anxious to reflect upon their line of conduct during their stay, and having well considered the path to choose, to follow it out.

The two girls and their mother were glad of an opportunity of comparing notes and devising plans, to be carried out so long as their guests remained.

Mr. Grahame seemed to be in a dream, glad to be away from everybody, yet hating to be alone.

A brilliant dinner was served at the appointed hour. As there was no point of resemblance in the characters of those present, save in those of Margaret Grahame and her mother, the conversation was certainly not monotonous. It afforded, however, an opportunity for those interested in such a task to observe and mentally comment upon their companions, and to draw conclusions to be treasured up for future use.

The Duke of St. Allborne was placed on the right hand of Mr. Grahame, the Honorable Lester Vane on the right of Mrs. Grahame, the Duke enjoyed the pleasure of having the fair Helen as his right hand neighbour, and Lester Vane was honoured with the company of Margaret, for which he was not disposed to be especially grateful.

Evangeline faced her brother Malcolm, and thus arranged they proceeded to discuss the various courses, to partake of the choicest wines, to converse, and to gaze upon each other.

The last item was by no means the least important. The Duke did his best to engross the conversation of Helen, and to keep his round light blue eyes settled upon her, which she affected only to observe now and then by accident. Then a scarcely perceptible smile turned the corners of her mouth.

The deep blue eyes of Lester Vane rarely left her face, even when he was addressed by others. As often as she turned hers in his direction, which, with a motive, she did occasionally, she perceived his earnest, dreamy gaze fixed upon her. Twice or thrice it made her shudder, she knew not why. It was fixed, expressive, teeming with passion, but, if it possessed fascination, it was that of the serpent. Insensibly, every now and then her eyes wandered towards his, and settled for a moment upon them, each was conscious of the effect they were creating, and when Helen averted hers, a strange dread thrilled through her frame.

Now, although the beautiful face of this girl absorbed so much of Vane's gaze, he was not ignorant of the fact that there was another face possessing great claims to loveliness at the table.

At first the timid reserve of Evangeline had caused him to pass her over unnoticed, but now that she sat almost opposite to him, he could not fail to notice her.

She was attired in a dinner dress of pale blue and silver, and, being very fair, looked charming. Her gentleness and quietness prevented her attracting much attention. To the Duke she was mixed up with the lights, the plate, and Malcolm Grahame, but the eye of Vane marked her down.

“I must fall in with her when she is alone,” he thought; “early in the morning or in byeways. She can be made, I am sure, to believe and to keep a secret, at any self-sacrifice.”

Once more his eye fell upon Helen, who was turning her dark, bright eyes upon the Duke, and electrifying him with her beauty, while she confused him by the smartness of her sallies.

“I will have her,” mused Lester Vane. “It may be a task surrounded with almost insuperable difficulties, but I will have her.”

Margaret Claverhouse Grahame divided her attentions between her plate and the young Duke. She had estimated Lester Vane at pretty much his value, and therefore did not trouble her head any more about him. She fastened her gray eyes upon the Duke as often as her dinner would admit, and she came to the same conclusion respecting him that Lester Vane had with her sister Helen.

“He must be mine. He is fat and awkward,” she thought, “but he is a duke, and I am born to bear the rank of a duchess.”

On the period appointed by etiquette for the ladies to

retire arriving, the young ladies, led by Mrs. Grahame, quitted the apartment, to leave the gentlemen to their wine. They were now on much more familiar terms with each other, and, as the ladies retired, the Duke rising with the gentlemen, said to Helen—

“Weally, Miss Gwahame, I gwow evwy day moah and moah convinced that the wegulation which dwove the ladies fwom our society, though only faw a time, was absolutely bawbawous; and the pwesent fashion which pwescwibes a limit to the sepawation, an intwo-duction of the most admiwable kind. Believe me, I shall, with all wespect to my hospitable host, count the minutes until we join you in the dwawing woom.”

“And I!” exclaimed Lester Vane, in a tone of voice which compelled Helen to turn towards him; their eyes met—again she felt a strange, thrilling dread pass over her frame; she turned her eyes away.

“I am grateful!” she responded with a bow, and hastily quitted the room with her mother and sisters.

She did not enter the drawing-room, but ran into her own dressing-room, and, throwing herself in a chair, buried her face in a handkerchief.

She gave way to a passionate burst of tears; presently she drew from her bosom a small notē, broke the seal, and perused its contents many times, and then she crushed it in her hand.

“How inopportune!” she exclaimed, in a vexed tone; “any night but this; still the terms are so

peremptory ; what is to be done ?” She looked at her watch. “It is the hour,” she said ; “ what if I let it pass by, and go not ? we part then to meet no more—no, no, that must not be—oh, fickle heart, to what fate will you drive me !”

At this moment her maid entered the room, and she hastily secreted the note. She mused for a second, and then she said—

“ Chayter, give me a shawl ; I will walk in the garden ; my head aches.”

“ It is very dark, miss,” returned the girl, “ and the air is getting cold. It will be dangerous to your health to walk there now.”

“ Give me a shawl, Chayter,” cried Helen, impatiently. “ It is my pleasure to walk there—my brain burns.”

The girl knew it was useless to remonstrate further, and handed her a thick shawl, which she threw hastily over her head, and left the room. In a moment she returned, and said—

“ Chayter, that dress I bade you alter this morning, you may keep.”

“ Oh thank you, miss,” exclaimed the girl, joyfully, for it was a rich one.

“ And, Chayter, remain here until you see me. Remember that if I am sent for, to say that I am lying upon my couch for a few minutes, and do not wish to be disturbed.”

“ Yes, miss.”

“Do not mention a word to any one that I have gone to the garden.”

“Not to a soul, miss.”

“There’s a good girl; I will reward you on my return.”

As she concluded, she hastened down the private staircase.

“She’s got a sweetheart, I’ll swear!” murmured Chayter reflectively. “I’ll find that out, see if I don’t that will be many a dress in my way.”

Helen hurried on tiptoe until she reached one of the parlours which had a window opening on to the lawn. She passed out thence, closing the window silently after her.

She kept upon the lawn, in the shadow of the house, for a short distance, and then pursuing a winding path, did not pause until she reached a small thicket of trees planted on the banks of a tongue of land curving the ornamental waters.

Here she stood still for a moment, and then she coughed thrice. A voice whispered, “Helen!” and she clapped her hand. The next instant there issued from the thicket a young man, who immediately placed himself at her side.

“I feared you would not come, dearest!” he said, in a low tone.

“Oh, Hugh!” she answered; “it was indeed a task difficult to execute, but you so earnestly wished me to meet you that I am here.”

“It is shameful of me to doubt you, Helen, after the proofs of affection which you have bestowed upon me, yet I know the full value of my prize, and I so fear to lose it.”

“And you still love me, Hugh?” she asked, thoughtfully.

“Love you!—oh, Helen! why do you ask that terrible question? Have I changed in look, in word, in thought, in act?” he exclaimed, earnestly.

“No!” she said, “oh, no! yet do you not think a time may come when your love for me will be diverted to another?”

“Helen!”

“Can you not, Hugh, imagine a time when one fairer, less exacting, more gentle, than myself, may win from me that love you say I now alone possess?”

“Helen, this language affrights me—I do not understand it!” he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise; and then added, passionately, “surely it is not for you to hazard such a terrible supposition! I love you, Helen—I have sworn it! I shall never change, never swerve from that adoration, that idolatry, with which I worship you. Oh! we are about to part for a time, Helen, and is this a moment to raise such doubts?”

She remained silent.

He pressed his clenched hand upon his heart, and said, with deep emotion—

“Helen, I repeat, we are about to part: you cannot have met me to tell me that the love you have declared

for me, the love which you have proved, and which I have, oh! so fondly, so dearly cherished, has faded suddenly away at a moment, and you wish that the separation commencing now should last for ever? You dare not do it!"

"Oh! no, no, Hugh, no!" she cried earnestly.

"Helen!" he ejaculated, in low but deep tones, as though his very existence depended upon her answer, "you have, as I believe, proved to me that you loved me; you love me still, do you not?"

"Oh! yes, yes, Hugh," she returned, with fervour, "I do, indeed, Hugh, love you with my whole soul."

She sank upon his breast, and he pressed his lips to hers, passionately.

At this instant there was the sound of a footstep upon the gravel path.

She sprang from his embrace.

"For Heaven's sake, be silent!" she whispered.

She turned her eyes in the direction of the advancing footsteps, and saw, approaching the spot where she stood with her companion, the Honorable Lester Vane.

CHAPTER VII.

Oh, love! no habitant of earth thou art—
An unseen seraph, we believe in thee,
A faith, whose martyrs are the broken heart,
But never yet hath seen, nor e'er shall see
The naked eye, thy form, as it should be;
The mind hath made thee, as it peopled heaven,
Even with its own desiring phantasy,
And to a thought such shape and image given,
As haunts the unquench'd soul—parch'd, wearied, wrung, and riven.
CHILDE HAROLD.

LOVE AWAKENING.

A SUDDEN involuntary effort of the memory had nearly cost Flora Wilton her life.

In that dreadful moment, when the house in which she had for years resided was a prey to the raging flames, when her own escape—owing to the fearful rapidity with which the fire gained ascendancy—was a question of doubt, she had remembered a packet of papers, which her father had given into her charge, with injunctions to preserve it, even at the hazard of her life.

It had been placed by herself in a spot, which though secret, was yet of easy access. To obtain it would be but the act of a minute; the fire-escape conductor had yet

to return to convey her from the burning house, to the street below ; and she made the attempt simultaneously with the conception of the thought.

The room she entered was densely filled with smoke. She obtained the object of her search. She remembered no more.

When again consciousness returned to her, she was in the arms of Hal, high in the air, upon a dreadful slope, the ruddy glare of the roaring flames making visible to her the frightful danger of her position. She relapsed into insensibility, and when once more she opened her eyes, she found herself in bed, the motherly face of an elderly woman bending over her, and her wrist in the hand of a white-haired medical attendant, who had himself applied the restoratives which had brought her back to life.

A thousand questions thronged to her lips, first wonder, then incoherence, then, with an awakening sense of what had happened, her desolate destitute condition burst with full force upon her, and she fell into a passionate fit of weeping.

The soft, kindly voice of the woman at her side was addressed to her in soothing tones, while the strictest injunctions fell from the lips of the doctor, forbidding speech on either side. He recommended Flora to commend herself to God, and then endeavour to sleep, under the conviction that the fearful event in which she had borne so prominent a part had not involved any loss of life.

Poor Flora! she had no words at command, no language in which to express the emotions the horrors of the night had occasioned, and she obeyed the doctor's behest of silence simply because her tongue refused its office.

She listened to the exhortations addressed to her, and made a feeble motion to the effect that she would endeavour to comply with the wishes that had been expressed: and so she was left alone.

Where was she?

She cast her weeping eyes around; but, in the well-furnished room, recognised no object that could enlighten her upon that point. By the aid of the light of the candle, which had been left burning upon a table, she could distinguish everything in the room plainly enough, but there was nothing to tell her whose house she was within.

But she had a surmise. Women, quick at assumption, are rarely far wrong in their suppositions.

Flora, when she opened her eyes to find herself at a dizzy height above the uproar of the excited multitude assembled to witness the destruction of the dwelling by the remorseless fire, saw, too, that she was in the firm grasp of Harry Vivian. She remembered that now; and she was led to believe, therefore, that she had been conveyed by him to the house of his uncle, and that the kind and tender matron who had spoken to her such words of tenderness was his aunt.

Her lip quivered as the thought passed through her

mind, and when—following the counsel of the doctor, no less than the dictates of her own pure mind—she offered up a prayer of thankfulness to the Throne of Grace for her escape, she invoked a blessing upon the head of him who had perilled so much to accomplish the work of her deliverance.

It has been said that it is seldom a woman disposes of her own heart—circumstances decide for her. One thing is certain—that she does not long remain in ignorance when her heart has been made captive. A man may for some time believe and assure himself that he only admires and esteems some very pretty girl: an accident will, however, disclose to him that he loves her. This is not the case with woman: a man upon whom she casts at first an indifferent eye may possess attractions which, gradually gaining her good will, ultimately win her affections; but her heart will no sooner be his than she becomes cognizant of the fact, and she takes her position accordingly.

Flora had been present many times when Hal Vivian had visited her father upon business. She had been irresistibly struck by his handsome face and well-formed figure, his pleasant expression of countenance, and his mild, courteous manner; but, if she had then thought of him at all, it was to consider him as an amiable young man—bearing the palm, perhaps, from every other she had as yet seen—nothing more.

Now, as she sought to close her eyes in sleep, she saw vividly his face, the bright red glow of the fire

glaring upon it; she saw his glittering eye, his contracted brow, his inflated nostril, and compressed lip, the collective symbols of brave energy; she saw, too, that the contour was handsome and noble—with an almost painful distinctness she perceived that the daring effort of courage, which then so brilliantly animated his fine face, was solely made to save her from a dreadful death.

While giving him full credit for the very noblest impulse, she had not been true to her woman's nature if she had not instinctively felt that his arduous exertions received an impetus from some favourable impression she had created upon him.

Indefinite, unacknowledged as this conception, in her agitated state, really was, it was not without its influence in composing her to slumber.

Her dead mother's pale face seemed to look down upon her from its place in heaven, gently and placidly. Her father's countenance, quivering with an agonised anxiety of expression, disturbed and sorrowful, oppressed her, but the features of Hal floated before her vision, appearing to grow brighter and brighter in her eyes, and to suggest a hopeful and happy future.

It was broad daylight when she awoke. She turned her pained eyes around her, and beheld at her side again that same kind, motherly face which had been the first she looked upon the night before, when recovering from insensibility. She was greeted with kind words as on the previous occasion, and was permitted this time

not only to recur mentally to the sad event of the night before, but to obtain some control over her natural emotions before a question was put to her, which called upon her to utter a word. During this interval, she learned that all her surmises had been founded on a true basis; that she was indebted to Hal Vivian for an almost miraculous escape from a dreadful death, and that she had been received and sheltered beneath the roof of Mr. Harper, where she was assured that she was welcome to remain until some arrangements for her comfort and convenience could be made.

Further, Flora was given to understand that the good Samaritan before her was Mrs. Harper, who, though she had servants in the house, believed that her own ministrations to the suffering girl would be attended with more beneficial results than if she had delegated the task to others.

Mrs. Harper was a truly generous, kind-hearted woman, and her efforts to serve others had, at least, the gratifying effect of rewarding herself, for hitherto she had been so fortunate as not to misplace them, or throw them away on unworthy objects. Her doves of pity and goodwill had always brought her back an olive branch, and if they had not, it is doubtful whether she would have ceased to render those services which came so opportunely, and were so grateful to whoever needed them.

When Flora could command herself to speak, she, in warm and eloquent terms, expressed her deep and

earnest gratitude for that self-sacrificing bravery which the nephew of Mrs. Harper had exhibited in the behalf of herself, and to the goodness and charity of the old lady, who, in her distress, had granted her so valuable an asylum.

“Don’t speak of it, my child,” returned Mrs. Harper. “For my part, I wish my hospitality had been afforded to you under happier circumstances. And as for Hal, Heaven bless us! I thought I should have died when I saw him crawling with you up the roof of that horrible old house over the way. I’m sure I never expected to see you come down alive, either of you, and, in truth, I don’t believe you would if it hadn’t been for those bold firemen, who, mercy on us! were up in the flames, moving about like a parcel of demons in the fiery regions in the play!”

Flora clasped her hands, and said sorrowfully—

“This perilling of life for me, and I can in no way repay it.”

“Tut, tut, my dear,” returned Mrs. Harper, “don’t think about that—these men are paid for their work; it is their duty, and they are used to it.”

“But Mr. Vivian?” suggested Flora.

“Just what I said, my dear,” observed Mrs. Harper, garrulously. “Hal is neither paid for nor used to such work, but when I said so, he closed my mouth with a kiss, and vowed that it was his duty that he had performed, and if it was to do again he would not hesitate one minute to go through all he did last night.”

"He is so noble!" said Flora, with the faintest of sighs.

"Poor fellow!" ejaculated Mrs. Harper. "He looks rather jaded this morning, and so odd with his whiskers and eyebrows singed with the fierce fire. Ah! it was a dreadful sight."

"Dreadful!" exclaimed Flora, with a shudder.

"Yes, and he was so eager to know how you were," continued Mrs. Harper "Dear me, what a many questions he asked me about you. Ah! well, I told him you should yourself reply to him bye and bye."

Flora was conscious of a rosy hue stealing into her cheek. She thought of his deep, earnest eyes, and how steadfastly they would after the late event settle upon hers, and how she would never be able to meet his, though she had at other times and recently done so without even a passing thought upon the matter.

Why was this? She sighed—perhaps she guessed.

It was some two or three days before she was enabled to grant an interview to Hal, anxious as she was for the meeting. All her clothes had been consumed by the fire, and Mrs. Harper's dresses were "a world too wide" for her.

Flora was not affected on the point of dress. She had no unnecessary or false pride in that respect, but she had the natural regard to external appearance, which every woman, young or old, unless utterly lost, possesses; and, though she was not truly cognisant of the influence a tasteful arrangement of well-fashioned

garments would have in heightening charms already of a very superior order, she had no desire to present herself to Harry Vivian disguised in a dress sufficiently capacious for Mrs. Harper, but in no degree contractable to her dimensions.

With most generous spirit and charming willingness, the old lady put the powers of her draper and her dressmaker into active requisition, and Flora was able to quit her room in the time mentioned.

She rapidly recovered her health and a certain serenity of mind. The loss of all her father's little property, buried among the charred ruins opposite, was an evil to be regretted, but it was a fact which no grief could disturb or obviate. A remedy was to be sought—something was to be done for herself, probably for her father too, who, an inmate of a prison, was scarcely likely to be able to help himself; and from the moment she came to recognise and comprehend her position, her mind busied itself in forming plans for the future, by which she should at least be able to support him who had no one now in the wide, wide world to look up to but herself.

She was hopeful and sanguine, but she knew very little of the world.

Old Mr. Harper knew a very great deal about it, plain and matter-of-fact as he appeared. He had for some time past determined to have a country house at Islington—in fact, had decided upon it, and was slowly having it furnished. He pushed on the work now; for,

after a very grave consultation with Mrs. Harper, his wife, he decided that the poor girl, bereaved of home by fire, and of a father by the law, could not turn out into the streets. So, looking upon her as a trust confided to his care by the Almighty, he resolved to take charge of her, house, feed, and clothe her, until something was done in her behalf by such persons as had a better title to perform the good work than himself.

Thus, at the end of a week, he calculated upon entering his new house at Highbury, which he should leave in the morning and return to at night, accompanied by his nephew, and he resolved that Flora Wilton should become an inmate as well as those who constituted his family. He absolutely chuckled to think what a delightful companion she would make his wife, who, having lived so long in the old house in Clerkenwell, would find the solitude of her new home, without such society as that now ready for her, absolutely insupportable.

Mr. Harper confided to Hal the task of imparting to Flora his intentions.

“She owes you something for the service you afforded her in escaping,” said the old goldsmith, “and so if she raises any foolish objection, the prompting of a reluctance to become burdensome, or any such stuff as that—for she is just the sort of girl to show a great deal of pride, you know—you will be able to combat her arguments and reason her out of it.”

Hal's face lighted up as though a sunbeam had made it radiant.

What happiness to have her dwelling at his home, her eyes to greet him when he returned at night, and follow him when he departed in the morning, her sweet-toned voice to welcome him and to speed him on his way, her delicious presence to smoothe down the fatigues of his daily labour, and to wile away imperceptibly hours which otherwise might drag their slow length tediously along.

Harry Vivian, overflowing with Mr. Harper's instructions and his own emotions of delight, one morning by arrangement entered the room in which Flora was seated alone, and advanced towards her shyly and slowly.

Flora, who, as the door opened, turned her gaze upon it as though she

Knew whose gentle hand was on the latch,
Ere the door had given him to her eyes,

as he made his way into the apartment, rose up. The colour fled from her cheek, and she was seized with such a sudden and violent palpitation of the heart that she was forced back into her chair again. She trembled all over. Then her cheek flushed, and she felt once more impelled to rise and hurry towards him to grasp his hand, and pour forth a torrent of eloquent gratefulness. The emotion which she experienced was new and strange to her ; her every nerve thrilled rather with a sense of pleasure rather than with any other feeling.

She was confused, dizzy. But withal, an overpowering gladness reigned within her soul that he and she were once more face to face.

Ay, they were palm to palm, too. At first without a word. What could they say? their hearts were too full for utterance; both remembered how together they had trembled on the verge of eternity, and there was a deep solemnity in the thought, which, for the moment, forbade speech.

Flora was the first—wonderful gift pertaining to woman—to recover her self-possession. In words, low toned, but earnest and heartfelt, she expressed her sense of the obligation she owed him, and though he, recovering, too, his speech, would have stayed her, she was not to be so checked, but gave utterance to all her full heart dictated.

“For my own life I am your debtor. I am sensible what I owe to you on that account,” she observed, with much feeling, “and I can never, never discharge the obligation; nay, perhaps I would not if I could, for indeed, Mr. Vivian, after the brave and noble conduct you have displayed, it affords me a gratification I have no words to describe, to know that I shall henceforward be attached to you by ties of gratitude which no adverse circumstances can ever sunder.”

Why did she suddenly turn so crimson, and look affrighted at the words which she herself had uttered? Was it that Hal’s eye danced with joy, or that he raised her hand to his lips, and pressed it with them?

Well, it matters not ; her eye fell upon the ground, and her hand remained within his ; she did not offer to withdraw it, though he had kissed it softly and tenderly it is true, but not without a little *empressement*—if ever so little.

He had not seen her frightened look, but her words had made his heart leap, and but that he had the proposition of his uncle to make, it is not impossible that he would have responded to them by confessing that her attachment, however ardent, was fully reciprocated by him. As it was, he restrained himself.

“My dear Miss Wilton,” he said, in a somewhat tremulous tone, “do not over-rate my services ; I was excited by the occurrence, and acted upon an impulse.”

“A noble one, Mr. Vivian.”

“But not uncommon. Thousands would have done as I have done, had they similar opportunities, and I should have exerted myself equally had you been an entire stranger to me.”

“That I believe,” said Flora, innocently and praise-fully.

“That is to say,” continued Hal, correcting himself, for he did not quite like her to entertain that belief, “my impression is that I should. I must acknowledge, Miss Wilton, that knowing you, as I have had the honour of doing for some time, I had an additional incentive to endeavour to snatch you from an awful death. I very much congratulate myself that I succeeded, and I pray you to believe that you cannot be more over-

joyed at my good fortune than myself. Thank God, you are safe, and I hope almost recovered from the fright. We will let the past go, and cast an eye upon the future."

"I have already done so," interposed Flora.

"I do not dispute it, my dear Miss Wilton," returned he, speaking quietly yet firmly, as though to drown all opposition; "but my uncle has been beforehand with you. He is a man of the world, and knows much; he is a wealthy man, too, Miss Wilton, and can well afford to be kind, considerate, and generous. He is quite alive to the very embarrassing position in which the late sad disaster has placed you, and he is anxious that you should not experience its inconvenience during the interval which must elapse between any arrangements you may be able to make hereafter for your future course. He has laid out his plans, with which you are connected; he confesses that they are not without a little selfishness in them, but he is wishful that you should overlook that, and not offer any opposition to the proposal he has empowered me to make to you."

He, then, in the most delicate words he was able to employ, laid before her his uncle's plan, and begged her to assent to it.

To have refused, under present circumstances, would have been simply a preposterous absurdity; she had no such notion, but she felt this additional kindness most acutely.

She remained silent, because she felt that she should

sob as she spoke, if she attempted to give utterance to her feelings. She turned her large eyes, suffused in tears, upon him—he was easily able to read their language.

With instinctive delicacy, desirous of sparing her further distress from painful recollections, he terminated the interview here.

In a rejoiced spirit he interpreted her look of overflowing gratitude as an acceptance of his uncle's liberal offer, and he once more pressed her unreluctant hand, as, relieving her of any necessity for speaking, he informed her that he should convey to his kind-hearted relative her judicious decision upon the matter.

If he were not in love now, it is more than doubtful if ever he could be.

During the period which had elapsed between the rescue and the present moment, Flora had not, for an instant, forgotten her father.

The expression of dire misery which pervaded his features, when he parted from her in custody of Messrs. Jukes and Sudds, remained present to her as vividly as though it had been photographed upon her vision. It haunted her, and added greatly to the sad impression with which the recent occurrences and several afflicting events had clouded her young life in the years immediately past.

She wished so much to see her father again, to be with him, to minister to his wants and to his comforts, to both of which, she felt assured, he had no one to attend,

and must, therefore, be plunged into a state of despairing wretchedness.

In accepting the offer of Mr. Harper, she saw—in no selfish or narrow-minded spirit, that she would, in her present dreadful strait, be at least provided with a home, until some means were obtained to place her where she would be no longer a burden to Mr. Harper, and she had not, therefore, hesitated thankfully to fall in with the arrangement proposed.

Yet she desired to be the companion and loving attendant upon her father in prison.

In prison!

How that dreadful word rang in her ears!

She had but a vague notion of that receptacle for vice, dishonesty, and misfortune. She had no clear perception of the difference between the debtor's and the criminal's place of incarceration. To her it was one huge black building, frowning and grim in its aspect without; all cells, chains, and torture within.

To some such a place she believed her father to have been borne. She shrank not to share his captivity. She had a sense that the air would be foul, stifling, pestiferous, and the cell wanting the light of day. She pictured four black, mildewed walls, a straw bed, always damp with slime and dank with humid earth, a small wretched table, a pitcher of water, and a lump of dark, noisome bread. She had heard of such places. There might be some alleviation where the crime was only inability to pay, but a prison was still a prison, and hope-

ful as she might be that his condition was not so bad, yet she could see it in no other light.

To Mrs. Harper she revealed her wishes, but that good lady not only had a difficulty in believing in its practicability, but even in its propriety.

Mr. Harper was consulted, and he hastened to set Flora right.

“Do not suppose,” he said, “Miss Wilton, that I have overlooked the situation of your father—common humanity would have forbidden that. I made it my duty to send to him, as early as the gates of the establishment where he is detained were open, on the morning after the fire, to let him know that the sad disaster had happened, but that his child was safe in my charge. I further caused him to be informed that as soon as you were able to leave your chamber, you would go to him, and explain all that I was unable to communicate.”

“Oh, sir! let me go to him at once,” cried Flora eagerly.

“If you feel strong enough, certainly,” replied Mr. Harper.

“Oh, sir! I am quite strong enough, quite—indeed I am. I so long to see him; I have so much, so very much to say to him.”

“Be it so; Hal shall accompany you to protect you. You cannot go alone.”

“No?”

“No! it would not be well to do so. Through the

agency of some unknown friend, a writ of *habeas corpus* has been obtained, and your father has been removed from Whitecross Street to the Queen's Prison—all of which you do not understand. However, there he is, and the place is one of which you can have no conception. The assemblage there is large, mixed, and not scrupulous in its behaviour. You would be bewildered without some one to make inquiries for you, and be, perhaps, rudely assailed by the unreflecting or the callous and the impertinent. Yes; Hal shall go with you, and you will, believe me, find the prison somewhat different to the picture you have sketched in your imagination."

Flora listened in silence, and acquiesced in the arrangement, not that the disagreeable part of it would be the society of Hal—nay, she would have gone with Jukes rather than not have gone at all, malicious ogre as she considered him—but she would have preferred to have gone alone.

She felt an intuitive reluctance that Hal, whom she so much esteemed, and whom, therefore, she would have wished to have seen her relatives in their best light, should visit her father in a prison, and that the visit should be paid with her.

But inexorable circumstances compelling, she set out with him, her small hand resting upon his arm, and making him feel a far wealthier and happier potentate than any monarch that ever reigned upon earth.

CHAPTER VIII.

There's a divinity doth shape our ends,
Rough hew them how we will.

HAMLET.

THE PRISON.

WHEN they together reached the lodge, or gate, as it is called, of the Queen's Prison, Hal and Flora gazed with surprise on the motley group waiting for the door to be unlocked, that they might enter to see those confined within.

A sallow faced, black-haired turnkey, who seemed all eyes, was what is called "on the lock," and he "took stock" of every individual about to pass into the prison with a sharp scrutiny, and with a rapidity which told that this had been for years his daily practice.

Young and old, rich and poor, were standing there together, elbow to elbow. The shabby man, who acted as messenger—the aristocrat, moustached and habited in the latest fashion—the slatternly dressed woman, with a basket containing small purchases—and the fine lady, whose husband had settled a fortune upon her, but who was, himself, "in" for a few thousands, and whose carriage waited without the gate—the squalid

child, the pampered boy, the virtuous and the vicious—were huddled together, forming no indifferent sample of the congregation gathered within the embrace of the high brick chevaux-de-frise crested walls.

The turnkey, who had been reading a newspaper with one eye and surveying his guests with the other, having found the collection of guests large enough, rose slowly up and opened the door. A crowd was waiting on the opposite side to come out.

As Hal, with his young and beautiful but shrinking companion, passed the turnkey, he inquired where he should find Mr. Wilton, and had to repeat his question before he could obtain a reply. At last, as the way was being stopped up because Hal, with the blood tingling in his forehead, refused to budge until he obtained his answer, the man said, in a low and surly tone—

“No. 5, in No. 10.”

Hal passed on and entered a long quadrangle, where he saw assembled some three or four hundred persons of all descriptions, many of them passing away their hours of confinement in the game of rackets.

An exclamation of surprise burst from both his lips and from Flora's. Her visions of a damp, horrible dungeon were dissipated in a moment.

The day was cloudless, and as the sun streamed down among the hordes congregated together, bustling here and there, standing in groups, or engaged actively at rackets, laughing, shouting, or speaking in high

tones, the scene appeared more like a community enjoying a festival day than a body of prisoners in confinement, visited by condoling friends.

Flora's surprised eyes ran eagerly over the lively masses, thronging in groups, or moving rapidly to and fro, and she felt a great weight removed from her heart, although even her small stock of worldly knowledge told her that the aspect of the society she beheld gathered here was a shade shabbier, and a dash more slovenly than that met with "outside."

Both she and her companion were slightly confused, but the latter, after a curious gaze at the motley multitude, turned his attention to the object with which he visited the place.

He saw upon the arched doorways leading to the prison chambers, a painted number upon the key-stone, and shrewdly guessed at the explanation of "No 5 in No. 10," which had at first a little mystified him.

Before he could advance many paces, an experienced eye picked him out as an "outsider" and a visitor. A dingy tattered man—sallow with long confinement, and the pressure of an enduring poverty, which had, as he who gave it as a toast, said, stuck by him long after his friends had deserted him—touched Hal on the elbow.

"Stranger here, I see," he observed, as the young man turned sharply around; "come to see a friend, I presume. If you will honour me with the name of the gentleman residing here, I will conduct you straight to his room.

If you don't find him there, I'll search for him among the players—sure to find him—one of the conveniences of this establishment is, that the friend you call to see is never far from his hutch—'not at home' is not known in our vocabulary."

Hal saw that the information was to be purchased at an arbitrary gift. He felt that a guide was unnecessary, as the information he had received from the turnkey, though not at first clear, was plain enough now. Yet there was something in the careworn aspect of the man's features—in the wistful, anxious expression of his eye—telling of the strong hope he had now before him of obtaining a breakfast; so that Hal, who had breakfasted heartily, could not find it in his heart to disappoint his expectations; and, after a perusal of the poor fellow's face, and a hasty glance at his threadbare attire, he said—

"I want to see a Mr. Wilton. Do you know where he is—situated?"

Hal had almost said, confined, but he arrested the word ere it left his lips.

"Wilton, Wilton," repeated the man; "he is a new comer, eh?"

"He is," replied Hal.

"Ah!" returned the man, "then he is either 2 in 8, or 7 in 4, or"—

"I can save you the trouble of speculating by telling you"—

"5 in 10," interrupted the man; "that is the only

other room which has been recently occupied. The lawyers—you a lawyer, sir?"

Hal laughed freely.

"No," he answered, "I am not a lawyer."

"Glad to hear it. The precious rascals! they have been driving a roaring trade lately. Ah, sir! what a glorious country this would have been without lawyers! No writs, no executions, no imprisonment for debt. By Jove! what a splendid state of things."

The man shut his eyes to enjoy the ecstasy he felt even in imagining such an Utopia.

"For swindlers no doubt!" observed Hal, with a smile; "but lawyers are essentially necessary to prevent honest men being devoured by rogues."

"Very true, sir; that is one side of the question. If they confined themselves to that line, they would be a valuable body of professionals, but unfortunately they do not. You are too young and too inexperienced to know that they are much more the rogue's friend than the honest man's counsellor and servant."

Hal shook his head.

"Ah! you don't know. I hope you may never have occasion to know. I do; God knows I do. I have been here eighteen years, sir. Never in all that time beyond the door through which you entered this pandemonium. The lawyers brought me here, and here I am likely to die."

"But can't you take the Benefit"—

"Of the Act. No! I am here for contempt of court—

a contempt of which I am intentionally as innocent as you are—a contempt about which I knew nothing—yet the rascally lawyers clapped me in here for it, and here I have been ever since, because I am not able to purge my contempt, as they call it. Besides, if it were not for contempt that I am here, I couldn't take the Benefit, for I am connected with a large property, and I don't intend to let the villains have that simply because I should, like a bird, be glad to get out of my cage. However, sir, you want to see Mr. Wilton, and not to listen to my doleful history. Come along, sir, this way."

He shuffled onward as he spoke, and Hal prepared to follow him.

As he did so, he caught sight of a man within three feet of him, fastening a stare of passionate admiration upon Flora's sweet face.

His gaze was impudent only so far as that it was fixed and steadfast. He had caught sight of her countenance and had stopped short, as though he had been transfixed suddenly to the ground.

He was about forty years of age, evidently a gentleman, probably a military man, for his carriage was remarkably erect, and his upper lip—though that now-a-days is no symbol of the profession of arms—was garnished with a thin, black moustache, long at the ends, and having the appearance of being perpetually manipulated by the finger and thumb of either hand.

His complexion was very dark, bearing evidence of having for years been exposed to the tender mercies of

an Indian sun. His eyes were a brilliant jet and unusually large; they flashed as he moved them; his hair, which was short, was black, as were his whiskers, which were thin and polished, curling at the edges with a uniformity that spoke of irons.

His attire was plain and dark, but that of a gentleman.

He was evidently one in no common position. Hal ran his eye scrutinisingly over him, and then turned a side glance at Flora, whose face he perceived to be flushed, and its expression that of one distressed at being thus rudely stared out of countenance.

Of course, with the instincts of his youth, he felt convulsed with a jealous rage, and burned to commit himself in some wrathful and violent way.

As Flora was nearest to the stranger, and must have touched him as she passed, Hal moved her by an easy act. Setting his shoulder firm, he increased his pace, as if to follow the messenger, and came into sharp collision with the gentleman, who had not yet removed his eyes from the face of Flora.

The effect of the concussion was to thrust him back some two or three feet, while Hal passed on apparently unmoved.

Another minute, and the latter felt his shoulder rudely seized. He wheeled round instanter. The man he had pushed out of his path was at his side, his features distorted with rage.

“Unmannerly cub!” he cried, “how dare you thrust yourself against me?”

“You are quite able to frame the explanation if you require one, and to comprehend my refusal to make any apology,” returned Hal, with calmness. “Let me also counsel you not to repeat the offence of which you have been guilty, or the consequences, as now, may not terminate in a simple collision.”

He moved on, as the excited individual exclaimed—

“But for that fair creature on your arm, I would have caned you soundly, you insolent puppy.”

Hal’s lip curled contemptuously; he refrained from replying to the threat, and left the man to resent his conduct in any shape he pleased.

They were now before the open doorway, No. 10, and followed the messenger up the worn stone steps that looked as though water was to them a fable and grease their daily food.

By the aid of the iron banisters and Hal’s arm, Flora, with beating heart, reached the second flight, and saw the messenger who had preceded them halting in the stone corridor before a door.

Upon it was painted the figure 5.

This, then, was 5, in 10, and within the room which that painted door guarded, was her father, a prisoner.

Still there was no grim turnkey, no dripping walls, no dark dungeon—though Heaven knows the vaulted passages lighted by small, arched, iron-grated windows, looked dreary enough.

“This is the place,” said the messenger, “the room where Mr. Wilton is staying; and with better luck than

I have. Ah, sir, my friends have all died, or wandered away long ago, and I, without them, or help of any kind, have been obliged to declare myself on the County. That means, sir, that I am supplied with a room and a scanty allowance of food by the authorities, but not a farthing in money, sir, not a farthing. You see before you, sir, a wretch who has not a farthing, nor any means of obtaining one, save through the charity of kind persons like yourself, who reward me with a trifle for conducting them to their friends ”

Hal put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and drew forth half-a-crown. The usual reward was about twopence. Sometimes, by the tough-skinned, a penny was doled out, or a profitless, “Thank you;” but half-a-crown—that was unhopèd-for munificence. With economy, how long would it supply him with tobacco and beer ?

The man’s eye glistened as a ray of light fell upon the coin. It was one of the last new dies, and was bright as from the Mint.

“What a beautiful piece of silver !” he exclaimed, with a grin of satisfaction. “Well, you *are* a gentleman ! When you come again, sir, ask for me—my name is Maybee : everybody here knows Josh Maybee, anything I can do for you *in* the prison I will : out of it, you know, is not at present in my line. God bless you, sir ! good day—oh ! stay, you had better knock and see whether Mr. Wilton is in his room. If not, I’ll run into the ground, and hunt him up.”

Flora tapped gently at the door, but there was no response. She turned the handle of the lock gently, and opened it a little way. She looked into the apartment with a throbbing heart.

Upon a bed she saw seated her father—the very picture of desolation and woe. His head was bowed almost to his knees, and his two hands were spread open over his forehead. He seemed unconscious of everything but the intense anguish under the influence of which his body was swaying to and fro.

Flora ran into the room: she sank upon her knees at his feet: she drew gently his hands from before his eyes, and twined her arms about him with a sweet tenderness.

“Father, dear father!” she said, “look up: see, your own Flo’ has come to you—to be with you—to share your prison—to tend you, and to be a comfort to you as she was at home. Look at me—speak to me, father dear.”

With a startled cry, the old man looked up, as if suddenly roused out of a dream of gloom and horror into a paradise of sunshine.

He caught Flora’s soft cheeks between his withered hands, and gazed upon her young, bright, lovely face with an expression of passionate joy lighting up his wrinkled, pallid, grief-furrowed features.

“Flo’!” he cried, hysterically, “Flo’! Flo’! my—my Flo’, not dead, not consumed! my own Flo’, not lost to me for ever! Oh, beneficent Creator! I can bear all

now: my sorrows are assuaged. Come what come may, I care not, for my child is spared to me. To my heart, my darling!"

The old man drew her to his breast, and pressed her convulsively there, sobbing, as he did so, like a child. Hal, with water glittering in his eyes, turned his face from them, and looked out upon the bustling noisy groups in the racket ground beneath.

Shabby Josh Maybee made an effort to clear his throat, as if he had swallowed a cobweb, and felt that, in spite of all his economic resolutions, at least twopence of the half-crown would instantly be melted into beer.

He darted away down the stone staircase, two steps at a time, with the practised agility of one who had descended them many hundred times. As soon as Flora could disengage herself from her father's embrace, she drew his attention to Hal, who had all the time modestly remained close to the threshold of the door. In glowing terms she related to him the part which he had played in the dreadful fire, the origin of which was a mystery. She told him of the desperate hazard he had incurred in his efforts to save her life, and she also related to him what had since occurred. Old Wilton, with tears in his eyes, thanked him:—

"Mr. Vivian," he said feebly, "the day may be distant, but I have faith that it will come, when I shall in some degree be able to repay you for the past: not that salvation of a life can ever be meetly rewarded, but

something in the direction may be achieved—some service may be needed by you, and it may be in my power to render it; it will show, at least, the spirit of my gratefulness towards you. Mr. Vivian, I have not always been the abject wretch you now see me; I may not continue to be such. Ah! my God!” he cried, putting his hands to his forehead, as though smitten with sudden agony, and then, turning to his astonished daughter, who was regarding him with an affrighted look, he said, in a tone of unutterable anguish—“everything was hopelessly, utterly destroyed in that dreadful fire.”

She clasped her hands, bowed her head, and replied, sorrowfully—

“Alas! everything!”

He groaned bitterly.

“The fire was so sudden and so violent,” observed Hal, gently, “even those who escaped had hardly time to save themselves in their night dresses—opportunity was barely afforded for that.”

The old man rose up, and paced the room, murmuring, in accents of acute misery—

“All gone, all gone, the long cherished hope of years—the one link which, through all my misery, has bound me to life. Everything has perished—my long, long sustained hopefulness is swept from me, and henceforth there is nothing left but misery and despair!”

“Father, dear father, do not give way to such gloomy fears,” cried Flora, tenderly caressing him.

“A cloud has long hung over our house ; it is at its darkest now, but it will disperse and pass away.”

“Never ! never !” cried the old man, hoarsely. “In that dread fire, all our expectations—all the possibilities of restoring them, are consumed ; we might have been wealthy in the time to come, now we must be beggars for ever.”

“Your sorrows overpower your better reason, Mr. Wilton,” exclaimed Hal, pained to see the acute grief of the old man, and the sharp tears of anguish coursing down the cheeks of Flora, whom he seemed to love more deeply and fervently each time his eye traced the exquisite beauty of her features.

Old Wilton turned to him.

“You know not the extent of my loss, Mr. Vivian,” he said, almost sharply, “you cannot, therefore, measure the depth of my grief.” Then, addressing his daughter, he said—“Ah ! my child, I am to blame that I did not confide to you the true value of that document which I charged you to guard with your life. Had I done so you would”——

“I have saved that packet,” cried Flora, eagerly interrupting him. “I returned for it at the last moment, and I should have died when I secured it, had not Mr. Vivian risked his life to follow me, and bear me through flame and smoke to a place of safety.”

She turned a soft glance upon Hal as she said this, which made his heart leap again.

Old Wilton stood speechless, staring upon her as if

distraught while she spoke. As she concluded, he said, in a hoarse whisper—

“Where is it? where is it?”

She drew from beneath her mantle a small packet, and handed it to him. He clutched it with trembling fingers. He ran his eye eagerly over it, though it shook in his hands, so that to decipher a word of that which was written in endorsement upon it seemed impossible. His breath went and came in short convulsive sobs.

“It is the same!” he murmured; “it is the same! Saved!—saved! My Flo’, saved!” The last words sounded feebly, and he staggered as if he was about to fall.

Hal rushed forward and caught him in his arms. The emotion had been too much for him, and he had fallen into a swoon. Hal laid him tenderly on his bed, and unloosed his neckcloth, while Flora, procuring some water from a brown pitcher, which stood in a corner of the apartment, bathed his temples and his lips with it.

After some anxious moments, spent in the endeavour to restore him, he heaved a deep sigh, and opened his eyes.

They fell upon his daughter’s face close to his own. Her soft arm was his pillow, and her gentle hand wiped the clammy dew from his forehead.

“Are you better, dearest father?” she asked, in low tones.

“Better! better!” he ejaculated, “Well! happy! saved!”

He pressed her cheek to his, and they mingled their tears together.

Hal knew they had much to say to each other, private matters to communicate, the past to speak about, and the future to arrange. In such communion, he felt that he would only be an intruder, and he availed himself of the situation to say—

“You would gladly be alone with your father, Miss Wilton. You have much to talk over of importance which my presence would render embarrassing to both. I feel a curiosity to watch the proceedings below. I will return for you in an hour.”

He did not wait for the answer, but quitted the room, closing the door after him.

“Oh! good and generous youth,” exclaimed old Wilton, gazing after him, “would that all the world were like him!”

Flora echoed the sentiment, but in silence. Perhaps, too, she had her thoughts concerning him; or why did her full lid droop as the sound of his descending foot-step gradually lost itself in the echoes of the vaulted passages.

As Harry Vivian entered the quadrangle where were assembled the “benchers” and their friends and satellites, he gazed around upon the noisy, active throng, uncertain whither to bend his steps.

He impulsively strolled towards the farther end of

the quadrangle, where racket-playing was going on vigorously. As he moved on, his eye suddenly caught sight of the dark, military-looking personage who had so rudely stared at Flora Wilton, and whom he had so unceremoniously ejected from his path.

He was in close conversation with old Josh Maybee, and twice or thrice during their conversation he pointed to No. 10, and Josh Maybee pointed there, too—even up at the window of No. 5, where Flora was with her father.

Not for an instant did Hal doubt that Flora was the subject of their conversation. It was so natural for him to surmise it. The moustached man had stared at her in the most marked manner—impertinently and rudely, as Hal believed. He was struck with her beauty—that was certain; he could hardly be to blame for that—how could he help it? But there the matter ought to end. Why was he making inquiries about her, as it was very evident he was? Why should he desire to know who and what she was? Perhaps he wished to see her again, and to speak to her. Nothing more probable.

According to Hal's calculation of consequences, he thought he had better not make the attempt.

After a few minutes thus occupied, the tall, dark gentleman left Josh Maybee, and walked as if in deep thought towards the end of the quadrangle.

Josh Maybee hurried with a smiling face towards the doorway, where Hal was yet standing.

He would have passed, but Hal caught him by the arm.

“Stay,” he said, “I want a word with you, Maybee?”

“Fifty, if you please, young sir,” cried Maybee, who appeared quite excited. “You have been lucky to me to-day, sir. Just had a crown given to me.”

“I guess who gave it to you—a tall, dark man with whom you were just now speaking.”

“The very same,” returned Maybee, rubbing his hands.

“Is it fair to ask the subject of your conversation?” observed Hal, hesitatingly.

“Certainly,” replied Maybee, “he didn’t caution me to keep what was said to myself. He asked me, first of all, who was that pretty girl—and, dear heart! she has a blessed sweet face—that was with you, sir. And I told him that I didn’t know. Then he gave me a crown piece, which I put away quickly, for fear he should ask for change or to have it back again. Ah! there aint many crowns and half-crowns given away here, sir!”

“Well,” exclaimed Hal, impatiently, “that was not all that passed?”

“Lord bless you! no, sir!” returned Maybee, turning the crown over the half-crown, and the half-crown over the crown in his pocket. “No, he asked me where I conducted you to? I told him 5 in 10. He asked the name of the gentleman you went to visit? I told him ‘Wilton.’ Then he asked me if I knew anything about Mr. Wilton? and I told him no. Was he a

scientific man ? I said I didn't know. Had he come up from the country ? I couldn't tell him. He asked me a good many more such questions, but I couldn't answer him. Then he said he was himself an Indian officer, and had not long returned ; he had been away a long, long time he said ; but he knew a Mr. Wilton before he went away, and he wondered if he were the same. Of course I told him that I could not answer that question ; and then he wished to know the room, and I pointed it out to him, that's all, sir."

"Did he mention his own name ?" inquired Hal, thoughtfully.

"No, sir ; he merely said he was an officer just returned from India, nothing more," responded Maybee, who felt more disposed for the twopennyworth of beer he had promised himself than ever.

Hal let him go. In less than a minute Mr. Maybee was at the bar and a foaming pint was placed before him.

Hal walked up and down, reflecting upon this event.

He looked after the Indian officer, but he had disappeared, and though he remained in the quadrangle the time he had prescribed for himself to remain away from Wilton's apartments, he saw nothing more of the man with whom he had come into collision.

The hour having passed, he ascended the stairs with a light step, and paused before the door of No. 5. He fancied he heard voices within, and knocked gently for admission. His summons was, perhaps, not heard, and

he repeated it louder. In the interval he was convinced that there were voices which he did not recognise, and this lent a greater firmness to his knock.

He heard old Wilton's voice exclaim, "Come in," and he entered.

He was not a little surprised on advancing into the room to perceive the Indian officer, accompanied by a young, dashing fellow, seated far too near to Flora to be agreeable to him. Old Wilton was standing, and displayed an air of dignity, which Hal, certainly, had never seen him wear before.

There was a silence upon his entrance, and the Indian officer gazed upon him grimly. Old Wilton, however, with a pleasant smile, and the manner of a gentleman, motioned him to a seat, and then, turning to the officer, said—

"Proceed, sir."

"I was about to ask of you, Mr. Wilton, whether you ever lived in Devonshire?"

"Am I, before I reply, permitted to ask your motive in questioning me? You, a stranger."

"Unquestionably. I have just returned from India after an absence—with one short exception—of seventeen years. One of my first objects, on arriving in England, on retiring from the service, has been to find out those old friends, dwelling in this country, who, in my early years, were kind and generous in their conduct to me. Among those I can so class, was a gentleman of the name of Wilton, who dwelt at Harleydale

Manor, Devon. A chance glance at that young lady's exquisite face awakened memories long since slumbering, and the accidental mention of your name, in connection with it, led me to seek you to ask whether you are Eustace Wilton, of Harleydale Manor?"

Old Wilton's lip quivered; he drew himself up erect, and said—

“I am that man!”

The officer rose to his feet, and grasped his hand, shaking it with great apparent warmth.

“Time has wrought great changes in us both,” he said. “I am Colonel Mires of the Bengal army—that same Ensign Mires whom you defended at a moment when honour, reputation, family, life itself were at stake.”

Old Wilton started as the name fell upon his ears; he raised his eyes to the face of the officer, and appeared to scan every lineament. Then, uttering an exclamation of wonder, he released his hand from the grip of the colonel, and sank into his seat with an air of stupefaction.

CHAPTER IX.

Till Fate or Fortune near the place convey'd
His steps where secret Palamon was laid,
Full little thought of him the gentle knight,
Who, flying death, had there concealed his flight
In brakes and brambles hid, and shunning mortal strife
And less he knew him for his hated foe,
But feared him as a man he did not know.

PALAMON AND ARCITE.

THE MYSTERY.

HELEN GRAHAME, with her hand tightly clutching the wrist of the young man with whom she had been in such tender converse, retreated noiselessly into the deepest shadows of the small thicket where they had met, and there stood with her companion, as the Honorable Lester Vane advanced, motionless.

Though greatly agitated by the unexpected appearance of her brother's guest in the garden at such a moment, she betrayed no outward sign of emotion. She could hear the beating of her heart, but, by an almost superhuman exertion, she was calm, collected, prepared for action, if discovered, and even in such an emergency could have spoken without any visible symptom of embarrassment.

The Honorable Lester Vane paused before the cluster of trees ; he even took a step or two as though to enter its recess.

Helen, had he but advanced one foot more, would have emerged from her place of concealment, and with some ready excuse for being there, have led him away. so that her companion might have escaped unobserved, but, as if satisfied that it possessed no outlet, he turned away and sauntered slowly and thoughtfully down the gravelled path by a separate route to that by which he had approached.

As soon as he was out of hearing, Helen turned to her companion, exclaiming—

“ I must leave you, Hugh, and at once—nay, dearest, do not urge me to remain ; you know what happiness it would be to me to share your dear society for hours—would it were for ever !—but it would be madness to risk discovery for a few minutes of stolen felicity.”

“ Helen, I cannot part from you thus,” returned the youth at her side, in a voice trembling with emotion. “ I am quitting London—you know it—possibly by dawn in the morning ; and these may be the last few precious moments I may pass with you for a long and dreary term.”

“ Nay, you will soon return, Hugh,” she said, with a seeming conviction that his absence would be brief.

He shook his head sadly.

“ I do not know what are the intentions of my uncle with respect to my future movements,” he answered

“ I know only that I am ordered to be in readiness to proceed at a minute’s notice to Southampton, there to await further instructions, and to be prepared for the possibility of having to undertake a far more distant journey.”

“ Far more distant journey, Hugh ?”

“ Helen, I have very powerful reasons for believing that my destination is India.”

An exclamation burst from the lips of the young girl. A thousand thoughts flashed through her brain at the vision of a long separation from him who now addressed her.

Alas ! for Hugh—they were not such thoughts as he could have wished to occupy her mind.

She would regret his departure unquestionably : but it brought with it a sense of liberty, a freedom of action, an unquestioned license for listening to soft words from other lips, and for responding to meaning glances from admiring eyes, without the dullness of indifference or a flash of scorn. The suggestion of a protracted separation brought more strongly before her mind the ducal coronet of the young peer, now in her father’s mansion, and the impressive eyes of Lester Vane.

She was silent. Her mind was too busy to permit her to speak a word.

She had involuntarily uttered an exclamation when he revealed his fear that he was about to leave England for a lengthened term, and he attributed her subsequent

silence to the grief he presumed she would necessarily feel at the occurrence of an event which, to him, was distracting.

He twined his arms about her waist, and she rested her beautiful face upon his shoulder. He pressed the lips thus offered up to his own, and, with a groan of agony, murmured—

“Oh, Helen! my own noble beautiful one, my life’s treasure, it will be death to me to part with you. I cannot, will not, go: I will submit to any sacrifice rather. I will not be torn from you, for, in truth, it will break my heart.”

“Hugh, dearest, do not give way thus,” she rejoined, as her youthful companion, under the intense pressure of his feelings, suffered his head to fall upon her neck, and sobbed passionately; “this is not like you, Hugh: I have seen you brave enough in desperate peril—come, be brave now. Remember you are making yourself unhappy upon a surmise only.”

“Would I could view it only as a surmise, Helen,” he returned, sadly. “Unhappily, I have too much occasion for faith in the presentiment which oppresses me.”

“Mere childishness, Hugh! We have parted before, but only to meet again, and with increased happiness. You quitted me hopefully, you have returned to me joyously; why not again?”

“It is clear, Helen,” he said, raising up his head, and dashing away the tear which yet trembled on his

cheek, "that you can contemplate a separation with calmness and firmness."

"In expectation of meeting you soon again, certainly," she replied.

His quick ear detected a slight coolness, and a little impatience in the tone.

"But in expectation of not soon meeting again?" he asked, sharply and with misgiving.

"Why imagine that which is not likely to happen?" she returned, pettishly.

"I have told you that it *will* happen."

"Hugh, I do not comprehend what of late has possessed you," she retorted in the same fretful voice. "You have suffered the most ridiculous fancies and chimeras to seize upon your brain, and you not only make yourself miserable, but you seem to wish to compel everybody else to become so."

"Helen, you wrong me."

"Indeed, I fear I do not. Even to-night, when you must have been conscious that to accomplish a meeting with you was to me next to an impossibility, you insisted upon my complying with your request, and you bring me here only to entertain me with a string of doubts and fears, which are not worthy of you."

He started, and released her hand, of which, until now, he had retained possession.

"You do not love me, Helen!" he exclaimed, passionately, as he recoiled from her.

"Not love you, Hugh," she replied, throwing up her

head angrily; "you are ungrateful, sir. Ask your reason. At what sacrifice have I paused for you? You, at least, have had proof that my love for you was of no ordinary character; you——"

"Oh, Helen!" he cried falling upon his knees before her, "pardon me, forgive me! I am frenzied at the prospect of losing you. I do love you so fondly, so dearly, so madly, that death in any shape seems to me preferable to being torn from you for years. You are my heart's idol, its worship—my adoration; and if I am captious, full of strange conceptions and dread misgivings, attribute it alone to my passion for you, my Helen, my beloved!"

It is rarely that a young girl who is possessed of genuine tenderness of feeling for a young and handsome man, remains an indifferent listener to his ardent expressions of passionate devotion. Helen Grahame was not less susceptible in this particular than the weakest of her sex. She bent over Hugh, parted with her soft white hand his rich glossy hair from his forehead, and pressed it with her ruby lips.

"Rise, Hugh, rise," she said, fondly and earnestly, "I entreat you. Pray, be more calm. Elevate yourself above this morbid feeling of unhappiness, and let me hear what you have to communicate to me, for indeed I must almost instantly return to the house. I am expected in the drawing-room, and, if missed, a messenger will be sent in search of me. I would not for worlds be discovered here."

“Helen dearest,” he exclaimed with a quivering lip as he rose to his feet and once more twined his arms about her graceful form, “I leave London to-morrow—I know not yet at what hour—for Southampton; if that were to be the limit of my journey I should not be thus depressed, but from a confidential source I have received the hint that I shall be called upon to proceed by the overland route, to India—to the city of Agra. I believe this is decided; our separation cannot, therefore, be less than for six months; it may be for years—it is this thought which wounds me so deeply, for what may not happen in my absence? What indeed!”

He paused for a moment, overpowered by a throng of painful anticipations. Helen remained perfectly silent; and clearing his voice he went on.

“I cannot ask you not to forget me,” he said. “I know that would be impossible, but—but I would ask you, Helen—I would ask you, when I am gone far, far hence, to remember what we have been to each other, and to continue to me as, I vow to Heaven I will ever to you remain—true, loving, and faithful.”

“Hark” cried Helen, starting suddenly, “a footstep approaches—I must fly. Farewell, Hugh! God bless you, and guard you until we meet again!”

She threw herself into his arms. He strained her passionately to his breast, and imprinted a thousand fervid kisses on her lips.

“And you will be true to me, Helen?” he whispered.

“I will, Hugh, I will,” she replied with an earnestness rivalling his own.

“You swear it, dear Helen.”

“I do! I do!”

One more passionate embrace, many murmured but heart-spoken farewells, a long—long kiss, then she broke hastily from his arms, darted swiftly into the deep shadows of the over-arching trees, flitted like a phantom over the grassy lawn, and disappeared.

With a melancholy gaze he caught the last wave of her white garments, as they vanished in the distance and in the darkness, and then, with a deep sigh, he proceeded slowly to quit the spot.

Ere he had proceeded a dozen yards, a hand was placed somewhat vigorously upon his shoulder. He turned quickly: the figure of a man was before him, but in the darkness he could distinguish nothing further.

A voice he did not recognise said, roughly, to him—

“Fellow! why are you lurking here?”

Hugh flung him fiercely back.

“Who are you who dare thus address me?” he cried, angrily.

“That you shall know somewhat too soon for your satisfaction,” returned his questioner, again seizing him, and, with great strength, dragging him from the thicket towards the gravel path. “The lady, too, he added, “can hardly escape detection. I have marked her down.”

More he was unable to say, for the impetuous hands of Hugh clutched his throat, and prevented further utterance.

A desperate struggle ensued. It was so far but a wrestle. Hugh sought to release himself from the grip of him who had seized him, and his captor did his utmost to retain his hold.

In the course of the contention they emerged from the thicket into the moonlight, which fell upon the faces of both; each was thus able to distinguish clearly the features of his antagonist, but both were utter strangers to each other; simultaneously they detected they had not met before.

Hugh Riversdale knew not that he was striving with Lester Vane, but he was sure that he should never forget the face, the pallid face, within a foot of his own, which the gray moonlight was tinting with the hue of death.

Nor did Lester Vane fear he should fail to remember the features of one whom he instantly perceived was strikingly handsome and no common personage.

He found his strength failing him, that Hugh would succeed in releasing himself from his custody, and he shouted loudly for help. The next instant he received a tremendous blow upon the temple, and was hurled to the ground with such force as to compel him to remain there stunned and insensible. Hugh cast a glance upon him as he lay motionless upon the gravel path.

“I have seen that face in a dream,” he muttered; “mine enemy from henceforward. We have for the first time crossed each other’s path—we shall again. Woe to him who stumbles on it!”

The sounds of persons running along the garden walk caught his ear at this moment. Servants, roused by the shouts of Lester Vane, were hastening to his assistance. Hugh plunged into the thicket, vaulted over the iron fencing upon the edge of the ornamental waters, plunged into the winding canal, and swimming briskly but noiselessly beneath the shadows of some weeping willows, continued his progress until he reached a bend of the stream, not visible from Mr. Grahame’s garden; and then, emerging from the water, he disappeared among the thick cluster of trees which there lined its banks.

In the meanwhile, the form of Lester Vane, lying insensible, was discovered by two or three male servants, under the direction of Whelks. During the race from the house, he was absolutely last in it, but on finding that there was no enemy to encounter, he exhibited the most reckless display of daring, and rushed to the front.

Directly his pale green eyes fell upon the prostrate form of Mr. Grahame’s guest, he exclaimed—

“Oh, my ’evens! if it isn’t the ’onerbbel Mr. Lester Wane! Grashus! Is it the wine ’es overcom ’im, I wonder?”

“No,” said one of the servants, “he’s got a hugly

bump on his forrid ; a precious whack that ! Somebody about here must ha' given it him."

"Some owdashus thief, no doubt," suggested Whelks, with a swift glance over his left shoulder at the clump of trees, and a shudder which lifted his scalp, and pained him in the heels. "Jackson," he added, quickly to the man who had just spoken, "you 'elp me to carry Mr. Lester Wane's corpse—if he is a corpse—into the ouse, and you, Cussinks," he continued, addressing the other servant, "you dash into that clump o' trees, and 'unt about for the beggler."

Whelks and Jackson hurried on with their burden, and "Cussinks," declining the verb to search proposed by Whelks, sallied out for that gallant official, the policeman, who is supposed to know no fear, and to be ever ready to seize the most ferocious ruffian in existence with the same promptness with which he would attack cold mutton down a deep area.

By the time the house was gained by this little party, Mr. Grahame had been alarmed. With his son Malcolm and the Duke of St. Allborne he was hastening to the garden, when he encountered Whelks and Jackson bearing the body of Lester Vane. Almost at the same moment, the injured young man aroused from the stupor into which the blow he had received had flung him, recovered his feet, and gazed round him with an astonished air. He looked into the many eager faces bent upon his own, without recognising any of them.

The Duke of St. Allborne laid his hand upon his

shoulder, and shook him, saying, at the same moment—

“Vane, wecovaw youawself, my good fellah. We aw all fwiends. I’m St. Allborne—don’t you wecog-nise me?”

The sound of his voice brought back the absent recollection of Lester Vane. He put his hand over his eyes, as though to collect his thoughts, and then he exclaimed hastily—

“I remember all now—all, distinctly, clearly.” He looked up, and addressing Mr. Grahame, he said—“My dear sir, if you will allow me to retire for a few minutes to collect myself, I will join you with the ladies in the drawing-room, where I will relate to you the strange incident in which I have, I believe, borne the worst part.”

“But, Mr. Vane,” responded Mr. Grahame quickly, “the attack you have suffered”——

“Was made by no common individual, Mr. Grahame! one who is by this time, I have no doubt, far beyond pursuit.”

“But the object, Mr. Vane?” observed Mr. Grahame, with an air of mystified wonder.

“Neither plunder nor violence,” returned Lester Vane, adding hastily—“Pray interrogate me no further now. A few minutes hence, and I will relate all that occurred. I beg now to be allowed to retire to my room.”

Mr. Grahame bowed, and directed Whelks to show Mr. Vane to his chamber, while he, with the Duke and

Malcolm, his son, took their way to the drawing-room, talking over the mysterious event.

The ladies had entered the room a moment before them, and they now heard from the gentlemen, with astonishment, that the Honorable Lester Vane, walking in the garden, had been suddenly attacked and felled to the earth by some unknown assailant.

Not the least astounded of the party present was Helen Grahame.

The blood rushed from her heart to her brain; she felt as though a thousand bells were ringing in her ears. Then the life-stream swept back to her heart, leaving her as cold as death—and as colourless.

Hugh Riversdale and Lester Vane had encountered each other.

What had passed?

Her first impulse was to dart out of the room—the house, and flee anywhere—anywhere!

The next, to remain where she was, face all that might be brought forward to crush her for ever, and to deny every charge firmly, steadfastly; even to deny Hugh Riversdale, if in custody he were brought forward to confront her.

Oh! that she could only know what had actually occurred, so that she might be prepared to enact the part it would be best for her to play.

Why did Lester Vane refuse to explain what had happened, when he first recovered, in Mr. Grahame's presence? Why did he defer it until all were assembled

in the drawing-room? Did he know that she had had an interview with Hugh Riversdale?

This was remarkable, and much disturbed her. Yet if he did know that she had a clandestine meeting with his assailant, he could surely entertain no feeling of animosity towards her—that seemed impossible. The acquaintance of an hour could hardly have raised up in his breast a wish to injure her. Yet why did he pursue the strange course of refusing to relate what had passed, unless he knew she would be present to hear the recital?

Her anxious surmises were the suspicions that haunted a guilty mind, for she had no just reason to believe that he would connect her with the mystery at all.

She was perplexed, disconcerted, plunged into an agony of mind, as she pursued this train of reasoning. Still she saw the imperious necessity of appearing calm, collected, and full of wonder only, to the extent she would have been had she had no further share in the event than her sister Margaret.

By an effort of her will, she knew she could achieve this much, and she resolved to do it.

As she formed the resolution, the door opened, and Lester Vane entered. He was pale; there was a slight wound on his forehead, strapped up, but otherwise he was as self-possessed, and had the same cold smile playing upon his lips as when first he entered the sitting-room in the earlier part of the day.

A thrill of pain ran through the frame of Helen as she felt his large, dark eye settle upon her.

Then a sudden sense of her danger roused her to exertion, and she forced down all outward sign of the conflict going on within her breast.

She turned her glittering eyes slowly but full upon Lester Vane's. Met him on his own battle-field, and drove him back, for her gaze was so firm and unwavering, that he turned his eyes, after a searching glance at her, upon the ground.

All crowded round him save Evangeline, who, as usual, sat quietly and unobtrusively in a retired part of the room—if there was, in that brilliantly lighted apartment, such a spot.

Helen was among the first of those who called upon Lester Vane to explain the remarkable affair which had had so unpleasant a termination for him.

Her inquiries were dictated by the most intense desire to ascertain if her suspicions were correct, but her acting was a masterpiece; it had the air of a very natural curiosity only.

The ordeal, however, was yet to come.

By general request, eagerly urged, Lester Vane commenced his recital. Helen perceived that he closely and scrutinisingly perused her features while he spoke, and a strange feeling took sudden possession of her.

It was a contemptuous consciousness of a superiority in the power of deception. She knew that he was trying to read what was passing within her heart. She

applied herself to the task of baffling him, feeling that she could accomplish it with ease. It was her first direct essay in simulation under strong pressure, but she went to the task with the skill of a practised adept.

Cunning is not alone an art—it is necessarily a part of human organisation: but to become subtle and refined, it requires to be cultivated with careful discrimination, and to be pursued with merciless indifference to the feelings of the object upon whom it is exercised. The crafty rarely fails to detect the crafty, unless the more crafty with consummate ability assumes genuine simplicity—then as there appears to be nothing to guard against, cunning is to be effectively deceived by an affectation of its absence.

Helen never troubled herself to reason upon the point, though she had plenty of natural shrewdness to have reached this conclusion, if she had addressed her mind to the task. She was naturally an accomplished actress, and with no great effort could have seemed as full of natural wonderment at what had happened as her sisters Margaret and Evangeline, but she decided upon adopting a defiant aspect—one which should say to Vane, “You seek by an attempt to confuse me with your steadfast gaze, to compel me to make an admission—I defy you.” It was a mistake, because that look at once raised up an impression in his mind that she had something to conceal—that though she listened to his story attentively, met his gaze at certain parts of the recital unflinchingly, made remarks, and put questions—

all tending to disconnect her with any share in the transaction—she was in some degree mixed up with, if she was not one of, the principal actors in the little drama.

It is true that Evangeline exhibited emotions of distress and confusion, but he detected in her conduct no sign of guilt, nothing by which he could presume her to have been a participator in the scene he believed himself to have disturbed, if even she were a confidante ; but Helen, by her manner, challenged his suspicions, and, as it appeared to him, laughed them to scorn ; yet in doing so, gave him reason to form a conviction that they were well grounded. He set his teeth, and felt the blood mount to his sallow features.

It was but for a moment, and he became as pale as before, but he determined to apply himself to the task of making himself master of Helen's secret, and by its possession master of her, to be used as his own selfish interests might dictate.

He related to his marvelling auditors how he had escaped from the dining room to allay the heat of his fevered blood in the cool air which had been playing among the fragrant flower-beds, and sighing through the graceful trees in the elegantly arranged garden.

For the sake of effect, the speaker adopted a poetical style of narration, not without success upon the majority of his listeners.

The lip of Helen curled ; to her the chosen language was another proof of this man's art, and she scarcely

attempted to disguise from him that such was her impression. A sense of her estimate of his display, added only to the intensity of his resolve to obtain entire power over her, that he might make her endure tenfold the annoyance—it was something more—which she made him suffer now.

He could not quite comprehend why they so suddenly stood in an antagonistic position to each other. It was enough for him that they did so, and that he believed that he should be able to avenge himself upon one who viewed him in a light insulting to his vanity.

Proceeding with his tale, he said that, as he slowly paced the gravelled walk in the broad moonlight, he fancied that he heard the murmur of voices in a retired part of the garden; low and subdued, in truth, but still he was struck by the peculiarity of the sound, which was that of two persons in secret conference. He gained the spot from whence it appeared to come, and found himself fronting a small cluster of trees, into which he directed his gaze; but, not observing any figure or sign of a human being, he assured himself that he had been deceived, that he had mistaken the soft bubbling of the flowing waters beyond for tones of the human voice. He continued his walk; but he had not proceeded far ere the sounds which had previously attracted his attention were renewed. The position he had gained enabled him to command a view of the thicket.

He fixed his deep, dark eyes upon Helen as he

arrived at this part of his narrative, but her eyelid never wavered, nor did her face undergo any change.

He felt himself baffled for a moment—then he went on to say that he retraced his footsteps, and when near the clump of trees paused, with the intent of catching, if possible, some of the words which passed between the two persons who were engaged in such deep and earnest conversation. Not, he added, hastily, as he saw the eye of Helen glitter with scorn, to play the part of a paltry eaves-dropper, but to ascertain whether he had unconsciously encountered a couple of enamoured servants deep in a love-passage—with what withering emphasis he used those words!—or had detected a brace of thieves in the act of concerting measures to rob the house of Mr. Grahame.

While standing irresolute as to the steps he should take, a female emerged from the thicket, and fled past him towards the house.

“Towards my house!” cried Mr. Grahame, elevating his eyebrows with astonishment.

“Even so,” cried Lester Vane.

“Surely she did not enter it?” he cried, his eyes sparkling with fury; “no shameless person would dare”——

“My impression is,” said Lester, observing how intently, and with what remarkable self-possession Helen regarded him, “that she disappeared in the shrubbery in front of the house. I cannot be positive,

for the next moment I was in contact with her companion."

Still Helen's face was rigid, her features composed, and her eye steadily fixed upon his. But there was no expression of wonder upon her countenance, as upon that of all the rest. What more needed Lester to tell him that it was she whom he had seen flitting from the grove of trees across the garden to the house, and that she held secret meetings with some person unknown to her family?

"And this wretch—this insolent scoundrel," cried Mr. Grahame, "you fastened upon him, I presume, and thus was most murderously assaulted?"

"No," said Lester Vane, speaking slowly, and with distinctness, "the moonlight fell upon his face—that I saw clearly and well defined."

"You would know it again?" exclaimed Mr. Grahame, with eagerness.

"Amid a million faces," he answered, between his teeth, and then added: "He was a common-looking person, and I should have let him pass, but he made a desperate blow at me, although he did not utter a word. I avoided his first attack, and collared him, determined to punish him for his cowardly and dastardly conduct. I called for assistance, as I had no intention of entering into a personal conflict with a low ruffian about whom I knew nothing, but he inflicted upon my forehead a blow with some weapon which rendered me insensible. And so ends my history."

"Most monstrous!" exclaimed Mr. Grahame, with an air of indignant pride. "I never heard of such an outrage. You can describe the man, Mr. Vane, so that the police may be able to track him, and take him into custody?"

"Oh, accurately," replied Lester, "but not to-night. My head aches, and the task would be an annoyance—to-morrow with pleasure, but to-night excuse me."

"But the creature with this desperate person—could you not, my dear Mr. Vane, describe her—if it were only her attire?" urged Mr. Grahame.

"She may be in the house," interposed Mrs. Grahame, feeling that a deadly outrage had been committed upon the family pride.

"She may be in the house," returned Lester, with a peculiar glance directed to Helen; "all I can inform you, in reply to your question, is that her dress was of some light fabric, but as she fled past me like a phantom, I was not able to observe her sufficiently well to give a description of the lady."

"The lady, indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Grahame, in a tone of immeasurable contempt. "To-morrow, Mr. Grahame, this strange affair must be thoroughly sifted."

"Indeed, Mrs. Grahame, it shall be," he replied.

"How widiculously womantic, Miss Gwahame," laughed the Duke of St. Allborne, addressing Helen.

Helen started as he spoke. She had listened to the sneering sarcasms of Lester, and to her mother's expres-

sions of withering contempt, as though she had been exposed to an atmosphere of flame, and was bound to endure its tremendous torture without one sob of pain. But, great as was her agony, her thoughts would fly away with her to him who had occasioned this scene. She was, therefore, thankful to the Duke for thus checking an absence of mind, which might have excited attention and caused remark. She replied to him with a vivacity which somewhat astonished Lester Vane, though it helped to confirm the suspicions he entertained connecting her with the interview in the thicket.

She adroitly contrived to place the affair in a ridiculous light, without openly giving cause of offence to him; because, with affected sympathy, she deplored the injury he had received; but she went so far as to cause him to observe, with a sickly smile—

“Perhaps, Miss Grahame, *you* conceive that the affair, after all, was a mere fancy, occasioned by the fatigues of my journey to-day?”

“Or the stwength of our fwiend Gwahame’s fine old pawt,” exclaimed the Duke, with a loud laugh.

Mr. Grahame instantly took Helen to task in so serious and so stately a manner, that Lester Vane interfered to obtain pardon for her, which was granted, at his instance, in a manner that mortified her only more bitterly than she had yet been.

“I will bring him a suppliant to my feet,” she said, mentally, as her eyes, sparkling like a star, fastened

upon him, "and when he is prostrate, abject, I'll crush him remorselessly."

The next evening, Helen and Lester were walking in the garden together. She had already begun to weave her web round him, and he seemed likely to become so enmeshed as never more to escape from it.

Suddenly, when near the ornamental water, he paused. He drew from his breast a small but exquisitely fine cambric handkerchief.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Grahame," he said, "if I betray any impertinent curiosity, but I am desirous of knowing whether you are acquainted with this handkerchief?"

She looked at it. In a corner, embroidered, were the initials "H. G." It was her own, and one of value. She smiled.

"Indeed," she answered, "I ought to know it well, Mr. Vane."

"I found it beneath a tree, there," he added, pointing to the thicket in which she had parted with Hugh Riversdale.

She had, no doubt, dropped it on leaving Hugh the night before. She felt an acute pain run through her brain, as she saw in what direction his finger pointed, and that as he spoke his eyes were absolutely glaring upon her. She detected, in an instant, how much depended upon her answer. Controlling, as before, with a remarkable exertion of self-will, the expression of her features, she assumed an air of indifference, and

flinging the handkerchief into the stream, upon the brink of which she was standing, she answered—

“Possibly; it is one I some time since gave to my maid, Chayter.”

Lester was unable to utter a word in reply; he was baffled. He watched the handkerchief float away, and he said to himself—

“Yet it was you who stood last night in the thicket along with the fellow who felled me to the earth. Despite this check, I will prove it, and to you.”

CHAPTER X.

Alas ! he's mad !

* * * *

This is the very coinage of your brain.

This bodiless creation, ecstasy

Is very cunning in.

SHAKSPERE.

THE INEXPLICABLE LIBERATION.

THE emotion displayed by old Wilton when Colonel Mires made himself known to him by reference to an incident which had occurred to him at a period now long past, was a mystery to the two persons likely to be best acquainted with its source.

Flora, who flew to her father's aid, marvelled at it, and the Indian colonel wondered no less. Flora knew nothing, however, of the event alluded to, as her father had not suffered mention of it to escape his lips ; but Colonel Mires, from whom some emotion might perhaps have been expected while recurring to it, having been a principal actor in a circumstance of a remarkable nature, could find in a rapid review of what had then occurred no cause for Wilton to be thus suddenly affected.

Wilton had been called upon to render a great, a

valuable, and disinterested service; he had performed it nobly, because it then seemed he was in nowise personally interested or affected by the result; why, therefore, he should now appear overcome by his feelings somewhat staggered the Colonel, and set him cogitating. Perhaps, after all, there had been a motive in his generosity; and if so, it certainly behoved him to find it out, and that as soon as possible.

Flora was surprised, but that emotion gave way to one of affright when she beheld her father's pale and haggard face, his closed eyes, and his lips apart. It looked like the approach of death. She knew what a shock the arrival of Jukes had given him. Shattered as his frame had been by affliction, it had been yet more deeply shaken by the mortal agony he had endured when he first learned the destruction of the residence he had quitted by fire, when his darling child barely escaped with life. Events calculated to act upon his nervous system had rapidly followed each other; and the last, by its sudden effect upon him, seemed in no degree the least severe.

As she hung over him, mournful and foreboding words fell from her lips. She turned her eyes appealingly for aid to Hal, for of those present he was the only one to whom she could address herself, in reliance upon the sincerity of his readiness to assist her.

Colonel Mires observed her glance, and at whom it was directed. Before Hal, nimble though he

was in responding to her mute summons, could reach her, Colonel Mires placed himself at the side of her father, laid his fingers upon his wrist, and said, in a low but musical tone of voice—

“Be not alarmed, Miss Wilton. A sudden faintness only has seized your father. When last we met, his position was very far above this, and on meeting with me no doubt the fearful reverse he has experienced has acted upon his weak frame. Pray cease to fear—I believe that I can speedily restore him; and, when he is a little collected and composed, we will design measures to remove him from this charnel-house of the unfortunate.”

Flora turned her eyes with a grateful expression upon him, but became instantly embarrassed by his steadfast gaze, while a creeping sensation of fear and dislike passed over her head. She glanced at Hal, and was rather startled to find him regarding the Colonel with a very fierce expression. Why, she did not understand.

She had yet to learn that a lover rarely betrays satisfaction when he perceives the gaze of one of his own sex dwelling with marked admiration upon the fair features of the maid he loves.

Perhaps the Colonel observed the fiery look of the young goldsmith; if he did, he outwardly took no notice of it; but taking from his breast pocket a small case, which contained a phial, he poured a few drops into some water, and administered it to old

Wilton, who had no sooner taken it than he revived, and became speedily conscious of the presence of his visitors.

As the dark features of the Colonel attracted his attention, he clutched his daughter's hand, and, in a hoarse whisper, said—

“Is it safe—is it safe?”

“Is what safe, dear father?” she asked.

“The paper!—the paper I gave into your care,” he replied, wildly.

“Yes! yes!” she responded, quickly. “I gave it back to you, scarce half an hour ago. Do you not remember?”

He placed his hand to his brow, and then pressed his fingers over his eyes, as if to recal what had recently passed.

The influence of the restorative administered to him by the colonel was quickly apparent. He withdrew his hand, and gazed about him, but only for a moment.

He rose up: his eye was bright, his carriage firm, and his head erect. His bearing gave him the aspect of another man.

“Colonel Mires,” he exclaimed in a tone of exultation, “your arrival in England, at this juncture, is most opportune—your discovery of me, in this prison, an interposition of Providence. Its consequences to me are of vital importance, and it is impossible to describe the joy, the happiness, it has brought to a man bowed down by a succession of dire misfortunes.”

“Mr. Wilton, I am unprepared to hear such expres-

sions from your lips ; believe me, it affords me especial gratification," rejoined Colonel Mires, casting his eyes craftily upon Flora, to observe what effect her father's words, in his praise, would have upon her. But she saw not his glance, for she was watching anxiously the features of Hal Vivian, who was listening to her father with a countenance which appeared to assume a deeper gravity at every succeeding sentence.

And she wondered that he should grow so serious, and seem so sad, because her father spoke in tones of joyfulness.

Had she known that he considered her father's favour a passport to her own, she might not have marvelled at his sober countenance at all.

Old Wilton proceeded, addressing the colonel.

"The hackneyed aphorism which tells us that 'the darkest hour is the hour before the dawn,' is true in my case, Colonel Mires. My dark hour has spent the whole force of its pestilential blackness upon me. I have been utterly shrouded in its gloom. Your coming is as the dawn which will herald my day of sunshine. How wondrous are the workings of Providence ! But now I was *in extremis* ; lo ! in an instant I bound into new life, and yet in the same old—old world. Oh ! Colonel Mires, my heart is too full for utterance. I will take another and a better opportunity to express, not alone what I feel, but to explain to you wherefore your arrival has filled me with delight, and why it will prove to me a benefit so inestimable."

“Upon my honour, Mr. Wilton, by so doing you will confer a great favour upon me,” returned Colonel Mires, “for at present, I do assure you, your expression of high satisfaction, and your excited manner, form together a problem which I feel quite incapable of working to a successful solution.”

“I should be more than surprised if such were not the case,” returned old Wilton, quickly. “How could you understand my gladness at beholding you, when the only conclusion you could form from the past would be, that I should meet you with combined feelings of regret and reproach. It is not possible for you to conjecture how your advent should be productive of happiness to me and mine.”

“If my coming to England—even though I know not how—should be the occasion of so agreeable a change in the lot of Miss Wilton, I shall only be too delighted at my good fortune, without caring to inquire by what happy combination of circumstances it has been effected!” exclaimed Colonel Mires, with another very steadfast, earnest glance at Flora, which embarrassed her, and did not have the desired effect of making her think favourably of him.

“Gratitude, Colonel Mires,” exclaimed Wilton, drily, “would, I have no doubt, raise up such a feeling in your breast.”

The Colonel winced, but bowed affirmatively. Wilton then added, hastily—

“Colonel Mires, your discovery of my detention in

this prison is, of course, entirely the result of accident. You did not come here to see me—of that I am aware”—

“The moment I had a suspicion”—

Old Wilton waved his hand.

“I am quite able to comprehend the reason of your presence, Colonel,” he said; “but I am not, to sustain a longer interview to day. You will do me a favour by excusing me now, but if you will oblige me with your address, I will call upon you there at any appointment you may make, and take an occasion to explain to you much of the present mystery.”

Harry Vivian had previously entertained some doubts about the saneness of old Wilton. The strange rebound from abject wretchedness to a species of delirious joy, startled him. *He* could see nothing in the exterior of the swarthy colonel from India, to raise up such a paroxysm of gratification as that displayed by the careworn old man, unless he expected him to pay off the detainers at the prison gate, and thus set him free. But when old Wilton requested of Colonel Mires his address, and offered to call upon him at *any* time he might appoint, then Hal's doubts were dissipated. What! with two thousand pounds turned into locks, bolts, bars, and iron gates, to arrest his movements, to talk of keeping appointments outside the prison-gates! Why it was the very phantasy of lunacy. He believed him to be without a farthing in the world, and had provided himself with a little sum with

which to carry the old man on, if he would accept it, and there was previously every probability that he would; but now, to hear his tone, and to note his manner, as well as to listen to his airy offer to appear anywhere at any time, he felt disposed to button his pocket, and to laugh. He did not do either—he whistled.

It was a soft, low sound, unconsciously emitted, not altogether well bred we must admit, but it was the very symbol of extreme surprise.

Old Wilton heard him, glanced at him, turned his eyes away, and a faint smile curled his upper lip.

Flora heard the whistle too, she looked at Hal, and then at her father. She had her misgivings likewise—she believed every shilling he had possessed to be gone, and to hear him speak thus made her heart throb violently. Oh, if grief and trial should have turned his brain!

Her father understood her gaze, he read her thoughts, and his smile deepened.

Colonel Mires heard the unconscious whistle, also. He darted a look at Hal, and then turned to Wilton, and peering at him under his eyebrows in a scrutinising manner, he said, in a tone which had more than a tinge of irony in it—

“Will you say to-morrow, Mr. Wilton?”

“Of course,” thought Hal, “that’s just it; he might as well say half-an-hour hence—one is as likely as the other.”

To his surprise, not less than to that of Colonel Mires, Wilton answered—

“To-morrow, if you please. At what hour?”

“At moonshine,” thought Hal; “poor old man, how mad he is getting!”

“Ten o’clock in the morning,” returned the Colonel, with a grim smile.

“At ten!” echoed Wilton; “you have not named the place,” he added.

“It must be here, if there is to be a meeting anywhere,” thought Hal.

Colonel Mires produced a card-case, and handed a card to Wilton, who held it close to his eyes.

“So far,” he muttered, and then exclaimed aloud—
“I will be there, Colonel, punctually, and without fail.”

“It will not put you to any inconvenience, I hope?” said Colonel Mires, with a mystified air.

“No, no, oh no!” returned old Wilton, with a smile.

“To be sure not,” reflected Hal, “how should it? there is only two thousand pounds to prevent him leaving the prison, and what is that to a man who has not two crowns to jingle together?”

Colonel Mires gave a dry cough.

“I was not aware,” he said, “that it was an easy thing to effect a liberation from this place. I have an old friend in durance here, whom I came to see; he has been here a length of time, and is in tribulation at the remote possibility of his deliverance.”

“The thing is not difficult when you know the way. I have a way,” returned Wilton, rather curtly.

“And two thousand pounds, too, of course,” mentally suggested Hal, considering it hard to understand why, under such circumstances, Wilton should have suffered himself to be imprisoned at all.

“I shall keep my appointment, Colonel Mires, never fear,” said Wilton decidedly, though coldly.

“You leave here, possibly, to-day,” suggested the Colonel.

“I shall accompany my daughter hence,” responded Wilton

Hal walked to the window and looked out: this last remark by Wilton seemed to him quite to settle the point of his sanity.

“Poor old gentleman! his brain is completely turned. Poor Flora! fresh troubles, instead of coming happiness for you,” he thought. “Well, I will try everything to make your heavy burden of care sit as lightly upon your shoulders as possible.”

“Now, let me repeat, Colonel,” remarked old Wilton, with emphasis, “I shall be glad if by taking your leave you will close this interview. I am fatigued—overcome by the exciting events of the past few days; I wish to be alone with my daughter and Mr. Vivian, ‘as noble and gallant a gentleman as England ever produced.’”

“Indeed!” ejaculated the Colonel, in a tone of insulting surprise.

“Fact, nevertheless,” continued Wilton, and raising his voice, said, “many a would-be Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*, would have hesitated ere he attempted to perform the brave deed this gallant youth has lately achieved. You will know more of him anon.”

It was strange how steadfastly the two men looked into each other's eyes as Wilton uttered these words. Colonel Mires was a soldier, a martinet, he had been able to look down his inferior officers and his men, by the hard fixedness of his gaze; but he could not compel Hal to wink an eyelash. The clear bright eye of the youth was not to be made to waver, and the Colonel found himself obliged to be the first to remove his gaze.

“Surely,” he thought, “he can never be the suitor for the hand of Wilton's daughter. If he is, he shall never have her. By heaven! so lovely a creature shall never be thrown away upon such a churl as he. A pearl for such a pig! Bah!”

He was, however, with much discomfort, forced to leave the pearl with the pig, and obliged to see that while Flora would not permit her eyes to meet his, she frequently suffered them, radiant with lustrous beauty, to settle upon Hal's face, lingering there as though loth to leave what they loved to dwell upon. It was not an agreeable reflection, considering the new emotions awakened in his breast by the sight of her face. It may have been that dormant passion only was aroused; he chose to consider it a new sensation, and determined

to satiate it at any cost or hazard. He was, however, not a man to suffer himself to appear to be disconcerted; he was cool and calculating, and was not defeated until the possibility of victory was wholly removed, then he accepted the condition with inward mortification, perhaps, and a hope to obtain the alternative of revenge, but he did not suffer to appear whatured. he really end Rage and disappointment he felt acutely, but no one ever saw him exhibit either.

He took his leave of Flora with that gentlemanly respect that betokens good breeding—of Hal, with a formal bow, which said plainly, though not rudely: “You may be a Chevalier Bayard, disguised as a civilian, but I am not ambitious of making your acquaintance.” He shook Wilton heartily by the hand, as if he were sincere at least in that performance, and expressing his gratification at the prospect of meeting him early on the following morning, he took his departure, bearing with him his friend, who had been all eyes and ears but of no speech.

When Wilton, by gazing from the window, had satisfied himself that Colonel Mires had mingled with the throng below, he returned to the centre of the room, and, folding his daughter to his heart, he kissed her forehead, and said to her—

“My own sweet darling Flo’, cease to regard me with such anxious eyes. I am not mad!—in very truth, my child, I am not. My sorrows have sorely tried me, but heaven has been withal kind, and has spared me my

reason. You do not know the source of my present joy, as you know not the occasion of my fall from a position, the pleasures and luxuries of which you were too young to appreciate, and which were snatched from you ere you were old enough to regret or comprehend them."

"And yet, dear father, whenever I see a handsome mansion, filled with splendid furniture, magnificent pictures, beautiful sculpture, standing in the midst of gay parterres, over which wave graceful trees, I seem to go back to a time when I lived in such scenes. I have fancied that I have dreamed of these lovely places in childhood; and when I have in later days come to see them, I have believed that my dreams only have recurred to me."

"No dreams, my Flo', but a real mansion, with its luxurious apartments, its galleries of pictures, sculptures, and articles of *vertu* rare and costly, its terraced gardens, its stately trees, its glassy streams and lakes, its tall fountains, and its gorgeous woodlands. No dream, my Flo'; for in such a scene you were born. In such a scene you shall reign, queen of beauty, ere you are much older. My Flo', no dream, but reality."

He clutched her by the wrist.

"The dream has been from the hour when that splendour, at one remorseless, dreadful swoop, was torn from my grasp up to the moment of Mires' appearance here to-day. That fearful interval has been the dark, horrible, terrible dream; but, my Flo', the

shadows of the night are passing from us, the fragrance of the morning air is in my nostrils, the golden dawn has begun to light up our too long darkened hemisphere, and we shall yet revel in the refulgent beams of an unclouded sunshine."

He pressed her again and again to his bosom, and kissed her with passionate fondness, while large tears rolled down his yet pallid cheeks.

While yet caressing her, and as Hal was preparing to ask him to give him some proof that what he had just previously asserted was no mere hallucination, a faint knock was heard at the room door.

Before Wilton could clear his voice to give the permission to enter the room, the door opened and closed instantly.

But rapid as was the action, the door on closing had left within the room Nathan Gomer.

He nodded at Wilton, he nodded at Hal, and he smiled—that is, grinned—at Flora. All the while his face glowed like burnished gold upon which a sunbeam rested.

Wilton uttered a cry of joy. He ran up to him, and seized him by the hand.

"I wanted to see you," he cried.

"I imagined as much. Here I am," responded Nathan.

Old Wilton cast his eyes rapidly upon Flora, upon Hal, and then on Nathan Gomer. For an instant he appeared perplexed, then he said to Hal—

“Flora has not seen the wonders of this place, Master Henry Vivian. Will you conduct her where she can see how the prisoners pass away their long and wearisome days of confinement? Just for a stroll.”

Hal could have told him that she had already witnessed as much as it was necessary for her to see, but he guessed that Wilton desired to be alone with Nathan Gomer, and he bowed assent.

“You have no objection, Master Vivian,” observed Wilton, fancying that he hesitated.

“Objection!” echoed Hal, with an astounded look.

Objection! What, to have Flora to himself for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour? unquestionably not. He emphatically expressed himself to that effect, and so Flora tied on her sweet little bonnet, and put on her neat little mantle, and laid the softest of soft hands upon his arm, making it thrill to his heart, near to which it rested, until he hardly remembered anything but that she was at his side—at once the richest, dearest treasure upon earth.

Confused by the noise, and by the jostling of the throng of persons in the racket ground, they unconsciously strolled round to the back of the prison, or to the county side, as it is termed.

Between the hours of ten and three, this part was comparatively deserted. At the period of which we are writing, the needy prisoners, who lived on the support of their creditors and the county, were alone permitted to mix on the parade in front, or to visit their fellow

prisoners who were better off than themselves, during that part of the day.

No county prisoner—for they had their prison pride—liked to be looked upon as a “county bird,” so he showed himself in front as long as he could. The back part, thus, as we have said, had few persons promenading its precincts at the hours named.

Flora and Hal were, in consequence, comparatively alone in their walk.

As they strolled on, both seemed full of thought; after a silence, which endured for a short time, a few remarks were made, but of no personal nature; at length Hal ventured to say to her—

“Can it be possible, my dear Miss Wilton, that your father is not labouring under a delusion in speaking of his immediate liberation?”

Somehow Flora had expected this question, yet she had not prepared an answer to it. She paused for a moment, then replied—

“From the moment my dear father was seized as a prisoner, until now, the whole affair has been inexplicable to me. I believe you know even more of his affairs than I do. What can I answer? the matter of his conversation seems to me to be visionary, yet I never remember him to be so clear in his delivery, nor so elated, without being incoherent.”

“That may only be a sign of the disease which may have fastened itself upon him, following the terrible agony of grief he has had to endure.”

“Oh, Mr. Vivian, in mercy do not say so—pray do not! I do not think he is deranged—do you not remember that when he said to me he was not mad, how coherently he spoke? I entreat you, Mr. Vivian, not to say you think his mind is gone; if you do, I shall believe you.”

Hal saw the tears spring into her eyes, and he blamed himself for having brought them there, especially when she said—

“It will so much add to the grief I have already suffered.”

“I would not add to it for the world, Miss Wilton,” he said hastily, and added thoughtfully, “it may have been selfishness which has led me to form the supposition, but I would willingly, though not cheerfully, abandon it if I thought, by so doing, you would be spared one painful emotion.”

“Not cheerfully,” said Flora with innocent surprise, “why with reluctance, Mr. Vivian?”

“Not reluctance, Miss Wilton, that is not the word—sorrow is the truer term.”

“I do not understand you; I am, I suppose, very dull; but, Mr. Vivian, is it possible that you could be sorry to find my father not insane?” she inquired, with some earnestness.

“Listen,” he said: “if what your father has said be not the wanderings of a disturbed mind, the return of the gentleman who has recently visited him, from India, has opened up to him an immediate return to

some former wealthy position, even though the instrument appears as unconscious of his power to effect it as we are."

"So I understand it," returned Flora, finding Hal pause.

"Then," he exclaimed, strong feeling being manifest in the tone of his voice, "I should not, I trust you will credit me, be sorry that he had achieved his immediate release from this filthy prison, or that he and you—you, Miss Wilton, were restored to a position you so eminently deserve to occupy; but I should, I fear, grieve to think that all your good could not be accomplished without my discomfort."

"Your discomfort?" asked Flora, catching his arm, and looking into his eyes with an expression of interest for which he would have willingly pressed her to his heart if he dared.

He was a little confused, for he saw plain enough that if he had no heart to pain her, she had no desire to occasion him discomfort.

"Well, Miss Wilton," he answered, "to speak honestly to you—I had reared up a little fabric, based upon what I thought to be your condition; I had expected from it much happiness, perhaps that of securing to you immunity from troubles and trials, so far as I could. By the return of this Indian officer, it is dashed to the ground, and shattered to atoms. I rejoice most sincerely that it has brought you and your father good, but do not think harshly of me if I selfishly regret that

by it my prospects of felicity are swept away entirely. In the time to come, when difference of position shall part us for ever, may I ask you, Flora—Miss Wilton—to believe that, had the opportunity been afforded me, I would, when tried, have proved to you a sincere and a true friend?"

"In the time to come—when we shall part for ever—what difference of station should part us? Oh, Mr. Vivian, I could not—I would not, accept a position which might bring such an estrangement to pass. I would sooner die—I owe—my life—to your bravery."

She seized his hand and kissed it, and then burst into tears.

Hal was almost in the act of placing his arm about her, and giving vent to a passionate declaration, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder.

He turned round with a sudden start, which almost upset the individual who had touched him. He found it to be Nathan Gomer, who grinned, and, pointing with his thumb behind him, said to Flora—

"Your father awaits you both in his room. He is about to quit the prison with you, but he wishes to say a few words to you before he departs."

"But the two thousand pounds for which he is lodged here?" said Hal, with a stupefied air.

"Paid, sir—all paid, sir! Mr. Wilton is free to leave here when he will, sir!" exclaimed Nathan Gomer, with the old grin upon his features.

CHAPTER XI.

Oh, love! of whom great Cæsar was the suitor,
 Titus the master, Antony the slave,
 Horace, Catullus, scholars, Ovid tutor,
 Sappho, the sage blue-stockings, in whose grave
 All those may leap who rather would be neuter—
 (Leucadia's rock still overlooks the wave),
 Oh, love! thou art the very god of evil,
 For, after all, we cannot call thee devil. BYRON.

SHADOWS.

HELEN GRAHAME sat in her dressing-room alone.

Scarce half-an-hour had elapsed since she had quitted the side of Lester Vane, after their stroll in the garden.

Her handkerchief, which she had dropped during her interview with Hugh Riversdale in the thicket, yet glared before her eyes as it had done when presented by him who, with a sharp, penetrating gaze, had sought to extract evidence out of her confusion to assure him that she was the heroine of the stolen interview he had disturbed.

She yet saw it floating and whirling among the circling eddies of the meandering waters, which ran past her feet, and drew such small consolation from the

possibility of its never being again recovered—at least to her disadvantage—as it might afford her.

It was something to have destroyed the only evidence that could identify her with that stolen meeting, which had been the cause of so much mystification, excitement, and scandal among the household. She could scarcely prevent a proud smile of triumph curling her small upper lip when she reflected that the mastery she possessed over the play of her features, when she brought her will into action, had enabled her to baffle the scrutiny of Vane, which she felt instinctively was exerted to enable him to obtain power over her. Her womanly instincts were too acute, too keen, for her not to comprehend that.

It is true she had no notion that he intended to act basely or falsely to her. In spite of his display, his assumption of wealth, and the inferences he left to be drawn from his suggestions, she entertained a conviction that his sources of income were far more limited in capacity than he wished them to appear. Her father's reputed affluence—of the reality of which she in common with the other members of the family, had no doubt—she could easily understand, would attract the attention of a young man of high family, who had but little with which to support his station, and she as readily comprehended that he would do his best to secure the hand of the eldest daughter of a man of wealth, if with it he ensured also the certainty of a handsome settlement, to say nothing of the un-

questionable charms of the "encumbrance" he would have to take with the gold.

She had not been twenty-four hours in his company before she detected that he had determined upon becoming a suitor for her hand, having fortified himself with a belief that her father would give with her a dower, which would for ever set at rest his pecuniary anxieties for the future. But she revolted at the thought of being sought for what she should bring, rather than for her beauty—her heart, so brimful of passion and tenderness—for her very self. Especially did she recoil from the supposition that she was a "tassel gentle" to be lured by such a falconer's voice, for the purpose of his own aggrandisement, and her whole soul rose in rebellion against being made the puppet in such a scheme.

The Honorable Lester Vane was well-formed and handsome. There were certain points in his figure and in his lineaments of a character to attract and to win the admiration of many women—those, at least, who, with the failing of their sex, are led by appearances. He had a musically-toned voice, and a tongue, gifted with the soft cunning of oily phrases, in so eminent a degree, that it could be scarcely surpassed by that which our mother Eve found herself unequal to resist. There were few women, who, if heart-free, would have been likely to resist his advances, or to have remained proof against them were he to address himself to them as a lover. Hitherto, he had not found female conquest

difficult; there was a peculiarity in his manner and appearance which interested a woman in his favour immediately she beheld him; and thus, having mastered the approaches, he, where he listed, found the citadel not difficult to carry by a *coup de main*.

Helen was conscious of all this. She had read his character intuitively, and had formed a just estimate of him. Perhaps her predominant feeling towards him was contempt; but with that was mingled a strange dread of some power he possessed to injure her, and which, at a future period, he would exercise with a merciless malignity. She knew this impression had no foundation, in fact—was, in truth, a mere undefined sense of impending evil, of which he was to be the perpetrator, she the sufferer. Yet, true to the nature of her sex, her conclusion, arrived at by no process of reasoning, was as clear and determined as though it had been based upon a train of facts which admitted neither of doubt nor dispute.

“At least,” she murmured, “Hugh can have nothing to fear from him, even though he will, I am fully convinced, omit no stratagem to gain my love, as the means of securing my hand and portion—the portion being rather a considerable item in the object he proposes to accomplish. His eye looks down searchingly into my heart, as though he would read and interpret its most delicate mysteries and fathom its secrets, that he may hold me in duress. Never! I defy him! He cannot, shall not, detect or decipher anything I may

purpose to conceal. He has destined me for his prey, a golden fly, to be enmeshed in the entanglements of a web, every filament of which is too palpable in my eyes. Ha! there are two words to a bargain. It would be a delicious revenge to bring this schemer down upon his knees before me, actually and absolutely an abject wooer: so that when, with burning words and scorching tears, he pleaded his love, I might spurn him with my foot. I will do it! Already has he commenced, with consummate art, to make me think about him: he must exercise a wily skill indeed to make me love him! I will meet him upon his own battle-field; I will not appear to employ either art or skill, yet will I stake my happiness that I will compel him to love me with a passionate ardour, of which now he does not believe his soul capable. Ay, and when, with a whirlwind of pleadings, urgings, and fervid prayers, he implores me to bestow my heart upon him, then, in my moment of triumph, I will open up to his terrible discomfiture my full knowledge of the speculation which embraced my purse with my person, and laugh with derisive scorn, at so shallow an attempt to win and wear me—*me!*”

While that reference to herself yet trembled upon her lips, a thought rushed through her brain, and a flush of crimson spread itself over her fair neck and face, and then it subsided, and left her deadly pale.

At this moment, the postman's well-known ring at the gate-bell, given with skilful force, resounded sud-

denly through the house. The noise made her start, and utter a faint scream. Her heart began to beat violently, while a strange presentiment seized her that the epistle which had arrived by this channel was for her. An emotion of dread oppressed her, for which she was at a loss to account, for she had but few correspondents, and among them there was not one whose communication ought to contain any matter to occasion her feelings of dread.

She had forgotten one.

She listened breathlessly for the light foot-fall of Chayter. She was not disappointed. The door opened, and her quiet, neatly-dressed, sleek maid entered, bearing a note upon a small silver salver.

Helen assumed an air of indifference she did not feel. She glanced, from beneath her long dark eyelashes, rapidly at the letter, but she played with the pendants of a bracelet, and yawned in Chayter's face.

"A letter for you, if you please, miss," said the girl, and handed it to her.

"Put it down, Chayter," said she, "I will read it by and by. I am in no humour now to bore over a long crossed scrawl from a tiresome school friend."

The girl laid the letter upon the small table at Helen's elbow, remarking to herself, as she gazed upon the superscription, that the school friend wrote a remarkably vigorous, masculine hand.

"Where is papa?" inquired Helen, with seeming apathy, although deeply interested in the answer.

"In the library, if you please, miss," the girl answered.

"And mamma, and the rest of them," added Helen.

"Your mamma, and his Grace, and Miss Margaret, and Mr. Malcolm, are walking in the garden."

"Yes."

"And the Honorable Mr. Lester Vane and Miss Evangeline are in the drawing-room."

"In the drawing-room?"

"Yes, miss."

"Alone?"

"Yes, miss, quite alone."

"Indeed!"

Helen felt surprised and annoyed to hear this. She did not stay to inquire why. Upon the first blush, it seemed to her that Lester Vane had no right to be alone with her sister. She was irritated and vexed; not, as she suggested to herself, that she cared, because she had a contempt for the man; but then, to preserve merely the harmony of consistency, he ought to be alone with no one else but her, and look into no other eyes than her own. Evangeline, too, so reserved—so shy. She shook her head. Perhaps there was more art and depth in that apparently timid girl than any of them had ever dreamed of. She determined, instantly, to observe her more closely. Evangeline hitherto had passed as a stupid, harmless, nervous child, yet beneath such an exterior might lurk much shrewd sagacity, and a power to think and act for

herself for which she had not previously received credit.

Helen rather prided herself upon her own perceptive faculties, and, like many of her sex, she was so exceedingly keen-sighted as to be at times precipitated into forming erroneous conclusions. It occurred to her that it would not be altogether impolitic to put in an appearance, rather unexpectedly, in the drawing-room, where Vane was *tête-à-tête* with her sister. A glance at the faces of both, she assured herself, would suffice to tell her what course Vane was pursuing, and it would serve to direct her future conduct.

She rose with this intention, and, as she moved past her little table, her eye fell upon the letter which the sudden communication by Chayter, respecting her sister and Lester Vane, had caused her to forget.

She turned her eyes hastily around the apartment. Chayter was no longer there. She was alone.

She took up the letter and held it to the lamp, so that she might see the superscription clearly. She started as she recognised the handwriting.

"Heaven! I thought so," she ejaculated. "It is from Hugh. How thoughtless to address to me here!"

She examined the post-mark, which bore the name of Southampton. She drew a long breath, as though to nerve herself to meet the contents of the letter, which she felt would have a marked influence upon her future destiny, and then she broke the seal.

The contents were penned by a hurried and trem-

bling hand, the very character of the scrawled letters betrayed the workings of a mind convulsed by passion and sorrow—the words themselves only too emphatically proved what the ill-formed characters suggested. She read, with burning eyes, what follows—

“Helen ! thou passionately loved ! Measure the intensity of my grief when you learn that my dread forebodings are verified. I sail by the “Ripon” to India on the 4th, three days hence. My agony is insupportable ! To be parted from you for years—perhaps never more to meet on earth—drives me to despair—distraction ! I could refuse to quit England. I did. An alternative was presented to me ; it involved the desolation of one to insure whose happiness my life were too mean a gift ; it would have hurled me into beggary, and would still have sundered me from you—from you, Helen, you my life-spring, the font from whence I draw the only joy this world can yield me. What could I do ? The chained and manacled slave had more freedom of action than I ! My choice lay between this loathed voyage and comparative annihilation, and my consent to leave England has been thus wrung from me. Helen, though but these feeble words greet your tender eyes, yet I am with you face to face, near, near to you in spirit.”

A cold thrill ran through the frame of Helen as she read these words, and she raised her eyes, shrinking and gazing into the misty space before her, as if expecting to see his form, phantom-like and grim, standing there.

But she saw only the pictures on the walls and the hanging draperies, so, with a cold tremor, she went on with the perusal of the letter—

“ You remember, Helen, that night when we stood together in the abbey ruins alone—the cold, grey moonlight streamed through the oriel window—shattered and decayed it was—and rested upon a mutilated cross. You remember that cross, Helen, as, silver-like, it stood out in bold relief? My earnest gaze was upon it, Helen, when my fevered, trembling lips uttered words in your ear only too feeble and inexpressive to convey the depth and intensity of that love, which your gentle tenderness and your unsurpassed beauty had won from me. And by that cross I swore to be true to you while I had life. I see that cross now, Helen! Can you? I repeat the oath I took on that night. Will you, oh, Helen, dearest? You do not forget that, while my vow was yet vibrating in your ear, you turned your lustrous eyes upon that glowing emblem of mortal redemption. Your sweet head reclined upon my heaving breast, and in faltering words, you owned that the passion was not unrequited—that you loved me. Your warm, fragrant breath played upon my cheeks as you pointed to that cross, and called Heaven to witness to your truth—to testify that, in the time to come, your affection should be as unchanging and as unchangeable as my own. Look, Helen, there! See you not that cross standing sharply and brightly out from the shadows beyond? Will you refuse the

duty it calls upon you to perform, or forget the oath it commands you to remember? Out of my deep love for you, at what sacrifice would I pause? What hesitate to do and dare, that you might be mine? Ah, Helen, will you be mine, as you have so often fondly sworn you were, and would be ever? Are you prepared for the test which shall prove it? It is this. Will you, on receipt of this letter, join me here? Will you, Helen? I have made every arrangement by which you can travel on the 3rd by the four o'clock train to Southampton alone and secure from interruption. On your arrival, you will be received by a lady, who will be expecting you, and will conduct you to apartments prepared for you. On the 4th, we will be united by a *legal* marriage, as we have been by love, and—nay, we will then bid farewell to England, with hearts light and free; for, come any evil after it, we shall at least be happy in the possession of each other, and can no more be parted, but by death. Helen, my own Helen, if you will fly to me, the devotion of a life will be too poor a return for the integrity, the purity, the magnanimity of your love. If you come not—well, words would be idle.

“HUGH RIVERSDALE.”

Helen staggered to her chair as she concluded the epistle. She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples; her brain was in a whirl; she had not the power for a minute or two to summon a single thought to her aid.

Remember that night! Ay! the events crowded into it were not likely to be forgotten by her. As her hot palms pressed down her eyelids, she saw as in a vision the ruined abbey, desolate and silent, in the broad moon-light, the moss-grown, ivy-bound walls, the dilapidated aisles, the triple-arched windows, mouldering and falling away, very skeletons of what they had once been; the rude masses of masonry half buried in the long, rank grass; but, above all, that cross.

That cross!

It now glittered and sparkled and wreathed before her eyes as if it were living flame, and darted out long, forked, arrowy tongues, to blister and consume her if she violated her oath.

She sprang to her feet with a scream and a shudder of horror. She gazed affrightedly round her; the sight of her maid, Chayter, who had, with noiseless step, re-entered the room, however, dispelled the vision, and restored her to something like composure.

She looked for her letter; it was open upon the table where it had fallen; waving her hand, she said, in a voice hoarse with emotion—

“Leave me, Chayter; I will ring when I require your services.”

The girl glanced at the letter and then at her mistress. She gave a short cough.

“It is growing late, miss!” she said, hesitatingly, “I thought——”

“Leave me!” almost shrieked the haughty beauty, stamping her foot violently.

The girl dropped a hurried curtsey, and slunk swiftly out of the room.

She had been witness to small displays of irritability, but never to such an ebullition of temper as this.

When alone, Helen strode to the door and locked it. She threw herself into her chair, and again pressed her beating temples with her hands.

“Is he mad?” she murmured. “Fly with him and to India! How selfish—how unreasonable!”

He asked for a sacrifice as the test of her love; but what a sacrifice! She loved him—he ought to know that. What had she not done to give him proofs of it? If the proofs he had already received were insufficient, what could suffice? Not even the very sacrifice he called upon her to make. He had spoken of sacrifices, he had reminded her of their mutual vow, but now he sought to make her crown those cumulative sacrifices by inducing her to fling away all personal considerations, and follow his fortunes—to minister to his happiness by the surrender of her own.

Not that she doubted she should be happy in becoming his wife, but then there was so much that went to make up the sum of perfect contentment, which she must forego upon quitting home, and which she could not hope to possess or enjoy after she had linked her fate with his. Trifles are they at best, but to have pleasure the rule, and retirement the exception to be

flattered, admired, the cynosure of adoring eyes—are constituent parts of many a woman's happiness, wanting only the love of one to make a perfect felicity. Helen was called upon to make her election. She could not, it appeared, have done both. If she flung away the pleasures of the world and the comforts of wealth, she would have to be compensated by Hugh's passionate love and entire devotion. If she flung away his love—well, there was still her luxurious home, and—and if he was bent upon being so very, very obstinate in his selfish demands, and in the event of her not taking part in his wild scheme, were to sunder the connection between them—well, there were others moving in a higher sphere than his, who would kneel at her feet, and give to her entire and undisputed sway, so that she but bestowed her hand upon the suppliant.

“I will write to him,” she said, taking up his letter, and placing it in her desk, which she carefully locked. “Yes, I will write to him, and show to him the weakness and the folly of what he asks. Papa would be frenzied, and mamma would surely die of mortified pride if I were to take such a step. No, no; it must not be. You were not in your senses, Hugh, when you addressed that letter to me, and so thoughtless, too, to direct it here. Poor fellow!—poor dear fellow!—how he loves me!—how deeply, dearly, he truly loves me!—dear Hugh!—yes, I well remember that night of mutual confession—oh! I well remember the tumult of joy which swelled my bosom when your trembling voice,

and nearly inarticulate words, told me that which I already instinctively knew, but which I so longed for you to confess, my dear, dear Hugh ! ”

To what result the train of reflection, now taking an opposite path to that which at first it pursued, might have led, we do not pretend to say. Helen was here interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by the voice of Chayter, who informed her young mistress that she was expected in the drawing-room, inquiries having been already made for her.

She gave a rapid glance at her face in the glass. It was pale as alabaster, but there was no further trace of the disorder her mind had suffered ; and so assuming a calm demeanour, she admitted Chayter.

“ I do believe I have been dozing,” she said to the sleek girl.

“ I don’t believe anything of the kind,” thought Chayter ; but, smiling, said—“ Dear me, miss, what a thing it is to be lovely, and have a dozen noble and beautiful gentlemen grieving to death for you.”

“ Chayter ! ”

“ Ah, miss ! it is as I say,” continued the girl. “ I can see. There is his Grace talking of nothing but you, and the Honorable Mr. Vane hoping that you are not ill because you keep your own room, and you all the while so indifferent, dozing in your chair, and Miss Margaret looking—I beg your pardon, miss—as if she would give her ears to be taken notice of by either of them.”

“Dress me, Chayter?” exclaimed Helen, abruptly, “and, if you can, pray be silent; your volubility makes my head ache.”

Chayter understood a hint, though she did not quite comprehend whether volubility meant impertinence or overwhelming information. She gathered from Helen’s tone that she was in no humour to listen to her prattle, and she was shrewd enough to keep her tongue still when its rattle was likely to be unwelcome.

Helen quickly made her toilet, and had seldom looked more beautiful than she did when she entered the drawing-room, which, though half filled by the guests and family, was all but silent without her.

Her eye ran round the apartment as she glided in, and she perceived her mamma and sister Margaret conversing together. Her papa was discoursing with the young Duke upon the management of estates, and detailing a plan by which to obtain the largest possible amount of income with the least possible expenditure, to all of which the Duke appeared to listen, though he yawned frequently; but he rescued himself from the charge of inattention by occasionally observing—“Weally!” “Pwecisely,” “Pwobably,” “Wemawk-able!” Malcolm was half-asleep upon a couch, and Lester Vane was seated by the side of her sister Evangeline, talking with her in a tone sufficiently low as not to be heard—at least, where she stood.

What strange feeling was it that possessed her when her eye fell upon Evangeline and Lester Vane, as it

were *tête-à-tête*? Why did a flush mount to her brow, and a pang of vexation shoot through her breast? He was nothing to her; what he might do ought to have no interest in her eyes, for if any feeling for him was predominant in her heart, it was not certainly of a favourable nature. Yet he had gazed upon her so ardently, and spoken to her with such gentle tones, that if she could draw a conclusion from his manner, it was that her beauty had made a deep impression upon his heart. Now to see his dreamy eyes dwelling on Evangeline's innocent face so earnestly, to observe his impressive manner, as he addressed her with words toned so as to make her gentle heart thrill with a new emotion, was to be made to feel that she had made no impression upon him at all, or that he made love to her simply *pour passer le temps*.

She burnt with vexation.

"He shall love me," she thought, "woo me, kneel to me. Oh! but how I will spurn him—shatter him with my scorn."

Poor Hugh Riversdale!

Upon the appearance of Helen, the Duke of St Allborne flung over the elaborate dissertation to which he was supposed to be listening, and quitting Mr Grahame, advanced hastily to his daughter; Lester Vane caught sight of her at the same moment, and rose to his feet, but without evincing any emotion, other than that of pleasure at her arrival.

"My dear Miss Gwahame," exclaimed the Duke, all

in a flutter of excitement, "I am twuly delighted that you have wejoined us; I began to feah you weah not well, and would afflict us by not wetawning any moah this evening. I should have been gweatly gwieved at youah absence, but faw moah so if you had been weally indisposed."

"Your Grace will, I hope, pardon my not being present with my mamma and sisters to receive you in the drawing-room," replied Helen, favouring him with one of her most bewitching smiles. "I am really ashamed to acknowledge to your Grace the truth, but I am afraid that while reading a few pages of a novel I fell into the most unromantic doze possible."

The Duke laughed appreciatively—a doze after dinner! Who comprehended its luxury more keenly than himself?

"Pway don't apologise, Miss Gwahame," he exclaimed, "I think a nap after one's wine one of the wosiest and most delicate awdinations of natchaw."

Helen smiled bewitchingly again at the Duke, for she knew the eye of Lester Vane, who had slowly approached her, was on her face.

"My Lord Duke," she returned, "do not misinterpret me—I dozed after my *book*."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Duke. "I beg pawdon. Exactly! I could not suppose however, Miss Gwahame, that the wine you sipped at dinnaw would have thwown you into a doze. I alluded to myself, eh, Vane?"

"Weally this girl is devilish pwetty," thought the

Duke, as he turned to his friend. "She is a pawfect beauty; I must weally wun off with her."

"You are skilled in after-dinner indulgence, you are, in fact, a perfect master of that species of luxury, St. Allborne," replied Vane, smiling, and added, with marked *empressement* to Helen, "I would not have done you the injustice, Miss Grahame, to have presumed that a *post prandial* slumber had denied us the pleasure of your fair society, if you had not yourself offered it in explanation of your absence. I should, if permitted to speculate upon your movements, have imagined that a stroll by moonlight, along the sinuous paths of the most excellently arranged garden attached to this mansion, had occupied you pleasantly, that, tempted by the beauty of the night—or some other cause—you had been induced to linger in the purple shadows thrown upon the place beneath, by the luxuriant foliage of a certain cluster of graceful trees, bending in pensive reflection over the flowing stream, whose rippling waters lave their base, the balmy air responding to the chant of the water's low music with soft sighs, and gently fondling in its murmuring the deep green leaves still and silent in their evening dreams."

The Duke looked up at his friend in indescribable astonishment. Lester Vane went on—

"Such a scene, Miss Grahame, heightened by those associations your own glowing thoughts could supply, would naturally furnish an ample excuse for an absence so much regretted by all present. May I suggest that

you should adopt it, rather than confess to an after-dinner nap?"

"And dreams of pumpkin pie," interposed Helen, with sarcastic bitterness, and a very formal bend. She understood his allusion; it brought a scarlet flush on her cheek, and made her eye flash like a diamond. Her lip curled scornfully as she replied to him, and if the sarcastic tone she adopted was unnoticed by others, it was not lost upon him.

"Mr. Vane," she added, not concealing an expression of disdain, "I prefer to adhere to the vulgar truth. There are people to whom such a course is inconvenient, but I find it less troublesome than to have to coin a number of small prevarications. I am afraid I am rather an unromantic individual. I catch cold, and have bad fits of sneezing come on, when I am foolish enough to be tempted by some poetical enthusiast to enjoy the beauty of a moonlight night, shadowy trees, rippling waters, and sighing breezes. On those occasions there is always a quantity of mist about, moist exhalations, powerfully suggestive I assure you Mr. Vane, of influenza. Moonlight scenes are very pretty things at the Opera, or in a picture, but the reality is really very trying to the constitution."

"The vewy weflections I have frequently made myself," burst forth the Duke with much vivacity. "You enwapchaw me, Miss Gwahame, youaw impwes-sions squaw so wondwously with mine. Moonlight nights aw vewy damp affaws; I nevaw venchaw upon

one without a heavy boat cape, a box of cigaws, and a pawson to play the twumpet, to keep me awake, nevaw !”

“You surprise me, Miss Grahame,” said Vane, nettled by the tone she assumed. “I imagined that your temperament was highly sentimental and poetical.”

There was a hidden meaning even in these words. Helen detected so much ; though she did not at the moment perceive the object at which the shaft was levelled ; she replied quickly—

“You have been premature, Mr. Vane, in forming your estimate of my character. I am not so easily read as my sister Evangeline. She is imbued with romance, as, no doubt, you have before this discovered. She trusts to seeming, poor child—I do not.”

For a moment her eye fastened itself piercingly upon him. She then took the Duke’s ready arm, and advanced up the *salon* to a magnificent harp, to fulfil a promise made by her to the Duke at dinner. As she did so, she looked for Evangeline, but she had quitted the room when Lester Vane rose up to greet her, and she liked not her disappearance.

Lester Vane looked after Helen as, with queenly dignity, she paced the room, leaning upon the arm of his bulky, ungraceful friend, all the brighter and more beautiful for the contrast.

“I am right,” he mused ; “I am on the track ; ‘she chafes at the very mention of garden and moonlight. My experiment, too, succeeds—two suns may not shine in her hemisphere—she is already jealous of my atten-

tion to her little, simple, innocent sister. There is power in that. I will use it. I will have her completely in my grasp."

He moved towards Mrs. Grahame and the passionless statue, her daughter Margaret, perfectly at his ease, and as unconcerned as though the incident of the moment alone occupied his thoughts.

Helen, too, appeared to commence her task in perfect serenity of mind, yet the words, "You remember that cross, Helen!" were ringing in her brain, and though she sang words and music correctly, and never faltered in the accompaniment, she prayed for the hour of release from the presence of guests, the sounds of voices, the glaring lights; to be again alone in her room, to wrestle with memories of passion and promise, to contend with conflicting emotions, to decide upon obeying the impulse of her heart, or to determine upon one great sacrifice, in order to secure the glittering triumphs of a brilliant position.

Alone! What would she not have given at that moment, while singing with such charming taste, to have been alone!

Before her song commenced, Mr. Grahame had been summoned to an interview with some person, who required to see him on business of importance, and during the performance of the song, while approving smiles were upon the features of his guests, and his wife and daughter Margaret sat in ineffable elation, he lay upon the floor of his library in a fit!

CHAPTER XII.

Where the lamps quiver,
So far in the river,
With many a light
From many a casement—
From garret and basement,
She stood with amazement—
Houseless by night!

The bleak wind of March
Made her tremble and shiver;
But not the dark arch—
Or the black flowing river.
Mad from life's history,
Glad to Death's mystery
Swift to be hurl'd
Anywhere! anywhere—
Out of the world!

HOOD.

A LIFE STRUGGLE.

WITHIN a close, narrow, scantily-furnished chamber, upon a miserable bed, sparely provided with bed-clothes, lay a young girl, weak and wasted, struggling in the deadly grip of a fierce fever.

The room—a back attic—bore evidence of the humble position of the householder, and, in addition to its native foul atmosphere, was impregnated with the

sickly odour prevalent in chambers in which there is sickness.

A truckle bed, a table, a chair, comprised the furniture; a soiled and ragged curtain at the diamond-paned window comprehended all the room possessed in the shape of drapery or hangings; the walls were bare, and washed with the odious salmon-hued distemper colour so prevalent in debtors' prisons and apartments in poor neighbourhoods; the floor-boards with wide interstices between them, and large knot-holes here and there, where mice looked up, and unsparable halfpence sometimes rolled down, had not even a show of comfort in the way of a small bit of old stair-carpet by the bedside. All within and around bespoke poverty of the grimmest school.

The girl, who lay upon the bed moaning in a disturbed slumber, with flushed cheeks, and pale and transparent lips, was no other than Lotte Clinton.

Upon the night of the fire, when landed safely by the conductor of the fire-escape, she found herself in her thin night-dress, exposed to the cold night air, which struck chill to her unprotected bosom, while her naked tender feet were upon the hard stones, ankle deep in rushing water.

The shock she had experienced on being awakened out of a deep slumber by the startling, horrifying cry of fire, the terror which all but paralysed her when, half-blinded and nearly suffocated, she discovered her room filled with smoke, the excitement which followed

the rushing from her chamber, the roaring of the flames, the crackling and sputtering of the burning wood, the hoarse cries of the mob, the perilous descent to the ground, the sudden exposure to the eager gaze of a multitude of faces, red in the glaring, unnatural light, the whirl, the turmoil, mingled with a species of hysterical joy and gratefulness at her deliverance, created a combination of emotions beyond her physical powers of endurance.

It is not wonderful that—affrighted, unknowing where to turn, whither to go, what to do, chilled to the marrow by the piercing coldness of the water rushing over her unprotected, delicate feet, utterly overwhelmed by what had happened, by the incidents surrounding her, and in which she was yet an actor—she should succumb; and find, that as some person hastily and roughly seized her about the waist, she should have a dim consciousness that the whole scene was fading from her as some expiring terrible vision, and that, when it disappeared from her eyes, she should be lifeless in the arms of the person who had caught hold of her.

The man who had taken her in his arms was a small tradesman, dealing in coals and potatoes, and a little—a very little—greengrocery. He lived in a neighbouring street, in a small house, and was blessed with a wife and nine children, who were “dragged” up somehow. He was one of the first on the spot when the alarm of fire was given. He saw Lotte landed from

the fire-escape ; he observed the agonized expression upon the poor girl's face—heard her low, hysteric sobbing, and saw her totter as though she would fall upon her face in the muddy, eddying pool in which, barefooted, she was standing. It was enough for him. He drew off instantly his heavy coat of “fashionable cable cord,” and, flinging it over her shoulders, caught her up in his arms, and raced off to his “old ’oman” with his burden, followed by a small train of women and boys.

His wife was no little astonished at this sudden accession to her household ; but her womanly sympathy was roused immediately she beheld the condition of the poor girl, and learned that she had been rescued from the raging fire, which her husband had so short a time previously run off to see, and she at once busied herself by applying those restoratives, known to most women, which, though simple, are efficacious in restoring to consciousness those of the sex who fall into swoons.

Lotte Clinton, being a girl of strong feelings, was not, however, easily brought to a calm sense of her great affliction ; on the contrary, she recovered from one fainting fit only to fall into another, worse than its predecessor ; and when, by the aid of the parish doctor, who had been called in, she was relieved from successive swoons and thrown into a sleep, it was only to awake in a paroxysm of fever and delirium.

Two days she lay thus : on the third, late at night,

when the hard-worked parish doctor made his appearance, in order that he might see his patient the last thing, he stood with the woman of the house, at the bed-side of the poor girl.

Two or three anxious questions were put to him, but he shook his head, as the woman thought, ominously.

“She is rapidly approaching a crisis,” he said. “By the dawn her fate will be decided. She has in her favour youth and a good constitution; but it is impossible to tell what may result from the ravages of so fierce a fever as that under which she is suffering. We must hope for the best, and leave the rest in the hands of God! I think it would be proper to make her friends acquainted with her condition, and the sooner they are here at her bed-side the better will be their chance of taking their last farewell of her.”

Those were dread words: ill-omened shadows did they cast. The woman raised her apron to her eyes, and gulped audibly, once or twice.

“I don’t know where to find her friends, if she has any, poor child!” she said, huskily. “My Jem picked her up, out o’ the fire, and brought her here; nobody’s been to ax after her; and we don’t know where to go. She’s never been in her senses since she was here, else I should have got her to tell me; but, lawk! lawk! it is a sad thing for a poor girl like this to die away from home, and ne’er a friend or relation to close her poor dear eyes. I’m a mother myself, sir! an’ God

knows, I should be dreadful wretched if one of my babbies was to die away from me in this lonesome way."

The poor woman sobbed unaffectedly as she concluded. The doctor, with a glittering tear in the corner of his eye, laid his hand gently upon her shoulder—

"While there is life there is hope, Mrs. Bantom," he said, kindly. "It is too early to despair yet. Had the young woman nothing about her when your husband saved her?—no letter?"

"Lord bless you, nothing on but those night things you see on her; not a blessed rag else. My Jem has been a trying if he could learn anything about her, but lor! he goes about such matters in sech a bladder-headed sort o' way, that I don't wonder at his making a bad out on it. He lurches and prowls about when he goes to ax for his own in sech a way that people are afear'd on him. It was only the other day he went for a little bill, which it was a long time a owin' an' we wanted the money badly—when he explained what he'd come for in sech an in and out round about sort a way that the people sent for a policeman, believin' he'd come on the sneak to prig the 'ats and mats in the 'all."

The doctor could hardly forbear a smile. He turned his eyes, however, on Lotte's face, and bent his head down closely to listen to her breathing, he felt her pulse, timing its rapid beats by his watch; then he

laid down the unresisting hand, and addressed himself to Mrs. Bantom.

“Poor thing!” he said, “she is very, very ill. If she wakes shortly, give to her a dose of the medicine I have brought with me—she must have it, especially if she be violent, incoherent, and resists your attempts to administer it. Should it not have the effect of pacifying her, send for me at once. Good night, Mrs. Bantom. Pray to God to spare her, for she is on the threshold of death,” he concluded, with much solemnity in his tone. He made his way out of the room. She lighted him down the stairs, and when she heard the street-door close she returned to the sick room to watch by the side of her friendless patient.

Her husband and her children were in bed ; he had his long hard day’s work to perform on the morrow, and rest was essential to him. The little colony of children were better where they were than anywhere else ; Mrs. Bantom, too, had her share of hard work cut out for her for the next day and required sleep, but she did not heed it. She thought only of the poor young creature who she believed to be rapidly quitting her brief earthly career for one that would have no limit.

By the feeble rays of the miserable rushlight burning, she watched the flushed face of Lotte, perceiving it become each minute more crimson and inflamed. She saw her bosom heave and fall, and she listened with a beating heart to her stertorous breathing. She saw

her head roll from side to side, her burning hands open and shut, and clutch at the bed-clothes. She heard with an aching heart the low moan of pain which oozed as it were with prolonged mournful cadence from the lips of the poor girl, and she prepared for the sudden and violent awakening to which the doctor had alluded.

But Lotte became silent and motionless again; the only change in her was, that her tongue, white and rigid, protruded from her half-opened mouth. The heart of good Mrs. Bantom smote her as she observed it, and she feared that the fatal moment was indeed at hand. She, however, performed her duty as a nurse with watchful perseverance, and with some grapes which the doctor had brought, she moistened the dry and parched tongue of poor Lotte.

This gentle attention, persevered in, passed not unrewarded. She could see it had a grateful influence; though, as it seemed to her, Lotte was dying in an unconscious state, and would breathe her last without making any sign.

So, though she knew only the prayers taught to her in childhood, and seldom now-a-days went to a place of worship, she remembered the words of the doctor, and she knelt down by the bedside. She was unacquainted with the subtleties of contending faiths. She had a faith which went deeper: she believed implicitly in the supreme power of God, in His ability to give and to take away. In that spirit she appealed to Him.

She prayed to Him, in earnest sincerity, to grant to

the motionless, friendless girl, stretched on the bed before her, a longer term, if that, by a more extended sojourn on earth, she might know a greater happiness than had, perhaps, yet been her lot; but that, if it was the Divine will to remove her hence, she implored Him with earnest heart, though with all humility and reverence, to take her to His bosom, that the shadow of sorrow or affliction might fall upon her never more.

When her prayer was ended, she turned her eyes, suffused with tears, upon her unconscious patient.

She started. The hectic crimson of the girl's cheek had paled down, and was fast changing to a pallid hue. It seemed even that on her brow a moisture had appeared. The heavy breathing had abated, as had the moaning and uneasy movement of head and hands.

Suddenly, Lotte's eyes opened, and she gazed feebly around her. She looked intently at the bare walls, the scanty furniture, and then earnestly upon Mrs. Bantom, who was watching her every motion with absorbing eagerness.

At length, in a low voice, she murmured, wonderingly—

“Where—where am I? Who are you? What strange place is this?”

Mrs. Bantom's own common sense told her that the crisis was over; and, so far, the girl's life was saved.

With a burst of gratitude, she exclaimed, clasping her hands together—

“ Oh, my God, you have listened to my prayer ! you have heard me, a sinner ! you have spared her ! ”

Tears checked her voice, and she buried her face once more in the bed-clothes.

Lotte regarded her with surprise—as, indeed, she did the whole situation. She felt strangely weak and powerless. Had she been ill ? What did it all mean ? She repeated the question, in a low voice, and then Mrs. Bantom jumped up, and hurried to the medicine bottle. She poured out a dose, and said, as tenderly as if Lotte was her own child—

“ There, drink that, like a good girl, and don’t ask a single question until you are stronger ; it will be quite time enough to know all then.”

Lotte would have persisted, but Mrs. Bantom was peremptory, and she was obliged to succumb. Within ten minutes after the medicine had been administered, she was asleep.

The battle had been fought. Youth, constitution, and judicious treatment had won the victory. The abatement of the symptoms was as rapid as had been the attack of the fever, and in two days more Lotte was able to sit up in bed, and communing with herself, come to a full knowledge of the peculiarity and the distressing nature of her situation.

She had, in the interval between the crisis and the present moment, followed the directions of the doctor, obeyed his instructions, and swallowed his medicine with the intrepidity of a martyr. The result had been

all that could be desired in her progress to health : fresh air was only needed to complete the rest.

How was that to be got at ? How, at present, could she obtain more than came in at her window ? She had no clothes ; all had been destroyed at the fire, everything had been consumed, including the very little money she had. Her very first impulse had been, on coming to a sense of her position, to send for her brother Charley ; but, alas ! a fellow-clerk had embezzled upwards of a thousand pounds from the firm to which they both belonged, and had absconded. Charley had been at once charged to accompany a detective, engaged to pursue him, to America, and he had started on the very night of the fire. He was already on the Atlantic, leaving the shores of England at the rate of three hundred miles per day. He had despatched a hasty note to Lotte, informing her of the mission upon which he had been despatched, and directing her, should she require a little pecuniary assistance during his absence, to apply in his name to his firm, and it would be readily afforded her.

This letter she never got. Charley had slipped it into the letter-box of a post-office, on his way to the Euston station, and it was conveyed to its destination by the postman on the following morning. But as he was not able to deliver it, he returned to the Dead Letter Office, first carefully writing upon it, "House burnt down ; gone away, not known where."

Mr. Bantom was, however, employed by Lotte as a

messenger to her brother, to inform him of her sad misfortune, but he pursued his inquiries for Charley in a manner so mysterious, that he raised in the mind of the Clerk whom he addressed a strong impression that Charley Clinton was deeply his debtor, for coals and greengrocery. Now, Charley's fellow-clerk was never out of debt, and had an intense loathing for all creditors; they were, he used to say, so offensively pertinacious even when they had got an answer, therefore he replied to Mr. Bantom's questions with curt brevity. All Mr. Bantom could gather was, that Charles Clinton had sailed for America, and his return was a question involved in obscurity. And the clerk facetiously added, "It might not be for years, and it might not be for never."

This intelligence was a sad blow to Lotte; what to do she could not tell. The honest people who had taken her in to their humble house lived too closely from hand to mouth to aid her; indeed, she was already a burden to them; they could ill—nay, could not—afford to keep her; this she was at no loss to comprehend by what she heard and saw.

After her passion of bitter, bitter tears on learning that Charley had gone to another quarter of the globe, had passed away, she consulted with Mrs. Bantom as to what was to be done.

"I cannot lie here," she exclaimed; "I shall worry myself to death. If I could get out, I could get work. I could in some way repay you for your kindness,

Mrs. Bantom, but to be kept thus—oh, I had better died—better have died.”

She wrung her hands, and sobbed violently.

“It ain’t o’ no use your taking on in this way,” said Mrs. Bantom to her, ready to mingle her tears with her, for to say truth, the poor creature was easily moved to weep. “Somethin’ ’ll turn up, I’ll be bound. My things is too big for you—and too poor—besides, I ain’t got much more’n I stand upright in, but I dare say I shall hit on a way to dress you afore long, so don’t worrit yourself. As for the bit you eats—lor! what’s that among so many on us? there, there, hold your tongue, gal, and keep your spirits up; I’ll find a way to help you.”

And so she did. She went among her neighbours to make up the different articles that constitute the dress of a woman, and poor, as nearly all of whom she begged were, none, when they heard Lotte’s frightful story, refused her appeal. The poor never refuse to help the poor, if they have any means.

Her last application, however, should have been her first, for it was to a young girl about Lotte’s own age and figure. She was an artificial florist, a worker, too, of eighteen hours out of the twenty-four—a diligent, unmurmuring, white slave. She was able to sympathise with poor Lotte, and she generously offered to lend her all the clothes she would require, until she obtained work, and would be able to return them.

With delight Mrs. Bantom accepted her offer, and

conveyed the clothes to Lotte. With yet greater delight did the poor girl attire herself in them, and hurry to the house for which she had worked before the fire had rendered her homeless. She revealed her unhappy position to the individual who had employed her (there are few like him, thank Heaven!) He listened coldly to her statement, and finding that six dozen cap fronts, his property, had been consumed in the fire, instead of commiserating her, abruptly informed her that she must pay for the blonde and flowers before she had any more work, and if in two days she did not bring to him the amount, he would pay her a visit accompanied by a policeman.

Sickened and affrighted, Lotte hurried from the house, her hopes once more dashed to the ground, her heart bursting with agony, no one to go to for counsel or assistance. What was to be done?

Almost frantic, she wandered about without an aim, feeling that she could not go back to the kind people who had sheltered her, unless she had some prospect of lifting herself out of her desolate destitution, and recompensing them, at least, for her board, although she could never repay the service and the attention they had rendered to her.

She wandered through the streets, growing weak and faint from an exertion to which she was not equal, and from being many hours without food, gradually becoming desperate, as hopeless. She thought of the coming night and the dark waters that swept silently

beneath the frowning arches of the bridges which spanned their breadth, and an ever-recurring thought kept ringing in her ears—

“ Anywhere, anywhere—
Out of the world,”

suddenly her eyes fell upon a printed bill; it said: “ One thousand cap-front hands wanted ! ” Not a second elapsed between her discovery of that bill and the resting of her trembling hand upon the knocker of the door. Her timid summons was responded to, and her application for work met with success.

She was requested to enter a room and to sit down, and “ make a pattern.” She was furnished with materials, and it was not long before she produced a “ front,” which gave great satisfaction to the employer. The answers to inquiries put to her being deemed satisfactory, materials for twelve dozen fronts were given to her, in a box, which she was to return with her work.

With a light heart and a heavy parcel she returned to Mrs. Bantom. Constant work was promised to her, provided she was punctual, and her work was approved of. She had no fears about that. She promised the work on the following Friday night. The task could only be accomplished by incessant toil, but she resolved to accomplish it, and she did.

In the little squalid bedroom she sat to her exacting toil; few were the hours of sleep she obtained during the time between the commencement and the close of her labours, but she was rewarded by completing the

last front within an hour of the time specified. More fit for bed than for a journey through the crowded streets, she staggered rather than walked to the house of her new employer.

Her work was given in, and it was commended. She was told to come the following evening, at six, the time when the workers were paid, and bring her book, when she would receive the money due to her, and more work would be given to her.

Elated, she returned to her poor abode, and slept happily that night at least. She had in five days and nights—there was not much to be taken out for sleep—earned ten shillings. She hoped the next week to earn a like sum, and by self-sacrifices, assisted by the kind forbearance of the Bantoms, to gradually clear off her debt, and to get herself clothes, which she should wear with the satisfaction that they were her own.

Ah! she raised up wonderful and glittering fabrics, but they were based upon most intangible foundations. However, she slumbered lightly, and rose refreshed, busying herself the whole of the day in lightening Mrs. Bantom's labours by assisting her in attending to her small regiment of blessings.

At six o'clock the next evening punctually, and with anxious hopes, she stood before the house of her new employer. She looked up wistfully at it. It wore a peculiar air of silence and dulness which she had not before observed. She did not pause to think upon the impression thus suddenly raised, but knocked at the

door. A pang smote her breast as it occurred to her that a hollow sound echoed through the house on the fall of the knocker, as though it was empty. She instinctively again cast her eyes upwards; the windows were all closed; there were no blinds, but all was dark within the house, and so still—so dreadfully still.

She waited: her summons remained unanswered. She knocked again. The same hollow sound reverberated through the building, and her heart began to sink and die within her.

A young girl now came up, stopped at the door, and knocked. She was bound upon the same errand as Lotte, save that a fortnight's work was due to her. She had scrambled and starved over the past week, she scarcely knew how. Wan and weak, but full of hope, she was here for the miserable sum for which she had bartered health, exhausted her strength, and perilled her young life.

There was no answer to her knock at the door, save the same hollow mocking echo, as before.

Another girl made her appearance; a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth; all here upon one errand—to claim the scanty sum for which they had worked, almost from dawn to dawn. They spoke to each other, questioningly: they looked into each other's eyes with dread apprehension, and they conversed in low excited tones. The wages they had come to receive had been earned with a death-sweat. It was to them of vital consequence.

One or two had homes and parents upon whom to fall back for assistance ; but the loss of the money to the others left them only a choice between the streets and the river.

Lotte grasped at a railing near her for support. A throng of sharp ringing sounds rushed through her brain. She took no part in the conversation. She could not have uttered a sound, her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth, her throat swelled and contracted as though it would stifle her.

She began to lose her perception of what was going on around her. Everything seemed to be absorbed in a harrowing consciousness that her beggary, her loneliness, and desolation had assumed proportions of more terrible magnitude than they had ever yet done—that they surpassed her power to endure them longer.

She had a dim impression that a person residing next door told them all that their employer had fled with his goods ere daybreak, no one knew whither.

Sickened, heart-broken, Lotte quitted her hold of the railing which had sustained her, and staggered away.

It was not difficult to find her way to the black and murky river, careering swiftly and noiselessly through the heart of the vast metropolis down to the sea.

“ The river ! the river ! ”

Those were the only words she muttered.

These words of such terrible significance seemed to be shrieked by demons in her ears She saw them in

fiery characters dancing *ignis-fatuus* like, before her, leading her on to her doom. She followed unresistingly.

How she found her way—what route she chose to the river-side—she knew not, cared not. She reached a bridge that spanned the dark waters, ere she was conscious of her proximity to that grave which could be self-made by one desperate plunge.

And now the fearful act she contemplated presented itself in its most awful guise before her despairing eyes, but not to deter her from her frantic purpose. No! If she remained on earth, her future was all black and unshapen. There was rest and immunity from the horrors of want and destitution in the grave.

She knelt down and prayed.

She compressed her hands tightly together; a wild hysteric groan, forced from her by the intense anguish created by her unutterable thoughts, burst from her lips, and she hurried on to the bridge, to end, by one fearful plunge, her sorrows and her young life.

As she swept on to a recess, blinded by her misery, maddened by a despair devoid of one glimmering of hope, the glare from one of the lamps fell upon her ghastly face.

At that instant a strong hand caught her by the wrist, and a friendly voice exclaimed—

“Miss Clinton! Miss Clinton!”

She fell back against the parapet of the bridge, and the voice changed its tone for one of horror and surprise, and it said—

“ Good heaven ! what is the matter with you ? how deadly white you are ! What has happened ?—where are you going ? ”

“ To die !—to die ! ”—she murmured, hoarsely, but faintly.

“ Hush ! hush ! my dear friend,” said he who stayed her, in a soft and slightly reproving tone, and added—
“ calm yourself, I entreat you ; do not speak for a minute or so ; collect your thoughts, and then turn your eyes on me. I am a friend. I have a right to that title, and you will acknowledge it presently. I claim to aid you in affliction or trial. You will not, I am sure, Miss Clinton, refuse consolation or help in need from Harry Vivian.”

Lotte uttered a faint, hysteric cry ; she clutched his arm, and bowed her head upon his breast. She knew he had the power to help her ; she knew he would. As she clung to him, he felt her frame tremble and quiver as though she had been smitten with an ague, and her hot tears fell fast upon the hand which held hers, and pressed it re-assuringly. He let her weep.

In a few minutes, he whispered—

“ We will not stay here, Lotte. It is chill and cold, and we excite attention from the passers-by.”

He conducted her from the bridge but a few steps only, for she was nearly powerless, and unable longer to continue the struggle without fatigue. He quickly perceived it, and had some notion of the cause ; so he said—

“I am so glad I have found you at last. I have made many efforts, since the night of the fire, to discover you, but in vain. Not alone to satisfy my own anxiety respecting you, but to allay the apprehensions of your friend, Miss Wilton, to whom you were so kind in her hour of bitter trial. Ah, Lotte! her misery is all past, her future life promises to be one of supreme happiness, if wealth and station can ensure it. Come to her now: she so wishes to see you again. It is not so far: a cab will quickly take us to her. You will have, at least, a kindly sympathetic ear in which to pour your sorrows, and—who knows?—the meeting between you may be the termination of all your trials and sufferings.”

Lotte tried to reply. An inarticulate murmur was all that escaped her lips. Her deep emotion did not so easily admit of suppression.

A cab opportunely approached, and Hal engaged it. He lifted Lotte in: she had not power to help herself. He followed her into the vehicle, and gave his directions to the driver.

The man whipped his horse, and the cab rattled away from the bridge.

Lotte thought of the sombre river, whirling on grimly, and she shuddered violently.

Hal pressed her hand.

“The gloomiest lane, Lotte,” he whispered, “sometimes leads us to the brightest land.”

CHAPTER XIII.

The same self-love in all becomes the cause
Of what restrains him, government and laws.
For what one likes, if others like as well,
What serves one will, when many wills rebel?
How shall he keep what, sleeping or awake,
A weaker may surprise, a stronger take?

POPE.

THE FORGED DEED.

MR. GRAHAME'S dissertation upon the improvement of land and the general economy and management of estates had been abruptly interrupted by the entrance of his daughter into the room where the guests and family were assembled. His apathetic and somewhat drowsy auditor, the young Duke, immediately on observing the approach of Helen Grahame, with a slight excuse to his host, emancipated himself from the dull topic droned into his ears, and advanced hastily to meet her.

Almost at the same moment, Whelks entered the apartment, with a printed card upon a silver salver. It was *not* an elegant production—the typography was bold and in effect smudgy, and the general get-up smacked rather loudly of the Seven Dials' press.

It was dingy, too, and nibbled at the corners, indi-

cating cogitation on the part of the person whom it represented, the pasteboard having been used unconsciously instead of the grimy thumb-nail.

The quick eye of Mr. Grahame caught sight of it almost the instant Whelks crossed the threshold of the door, carrying it very much with the air of one who had a huge slug on a plate, which he was seeking the earliest opportunity to dispose of.

Mr. Grahame's eyes flashed fire. What could the idiot mean by bringing to him such a dun, drabby bit of card at such a moment. He glared at Whelks, who remained unaffected; his gaze was upon the soiled article he carried, and his reflections far away into the future, resting upon the rosy hour when, liberated from flunkeydom, he should, with Sarah the cook, unite hands and savings, and go into business. It was not, he thought, with such "a hinfamous fustian-smelling objek" as that which rested on the silver salver, as though it had no business there, that he should make his business announcement to a British public, bursting with a desire to deal with him. And as he dreamed thus, he reached his master.

Mrs. Grahame and Margaret Claverhouse, both with an astonishment and indignation which their indomitable pride could barely repress, saw upon the silver salver, in the hands of Whelks, the offensively dusky, shabby card, and if glances could slay, Whelks' remains would have been spread over the magnificently "Sang"-decorated walls. Hewas, however, as we have said,

all unconscious of the effect he was creating upon the members of the household, and he reached Mr. Grahame only to perceive him glowering upon him like a tiger, inflamed with most sanguinary intentions.

With a low, guttural growl, he was about to make known to Whelks the nature of his convictions in having, at such an inopportune moment, thrust upon him so foul a communication, when his eye caught sight of the name—printed, according to the trade term, in fat-faced Egyptian—of Chewkle. He felt as if some one had suddenly smote him on the head with a club, and he broke into a cold sweat.

This man was in possession of his horrid secret ; he was in his power ; at any time he could blazon forth to the world that a Grahame, the proudest of a proud family, had committed a base act of forgery. He was now amenable to the law of transportation—liable to be torn from his present high position, and compelled to work and toil with thieves and scoundrels in a penal colony.

These reflections, none the less vivid for presenting themselves in that brilliantly lighted room, and in the presence of guests of high birth, made his face grow white, and his knees tremble.

He whipped up the card and thrust it into his pocket, hoping that it had escaped the eyes of all but himself.

Whelks delivered, then, an urgent message from Chewkle, and Mr. Grahame said, in a low tone—

“Where is he?”

“In the ’orl, sir,” returned the footman, with a perked-up nose.

“Show him into the library; I will come to him immediately,” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, in the same tone as before.

Whelks bowed, and departed to obey the instructions he had received, and then to discuss with Sarah the nature of the business of a “Kermission Agent,” as he styled Chewkle’s occupation, and wherefore it should, as it appeared to him that it most certainly did, obtain so great an influence over such a man as Mr. Grahame.

Mr. Grahame perceiving that Helen had absorbed the attention of the Duke and Lester Vane, glided out of the room into the library. As he entered it he became conscious of a strong smell of the “fragrant weed,” which, however, to his olfactory nerves had not “the scent of the rose,” and he saw Mr. Chewkle, with part of a truly British cheroot in his hand, standing near to the lamp upon the table, harassed by doubts as to the propriety of relighting it or the propriety of doing nothing of the sort.

Mr. Grahame bowed patronisingly, but said hastily—

“Not smoking, I hope, Mr. Chewkle!”

“No,” returned Chewkle; “it was out afore I came in, but I thought if you didn’t mind, you know——”

“But, indeed, I do mind!” responded Mr. Grahame, quickly, and then added most fiercely, as he perceived

the red and begrimed face of his visitor, his dirty collar, his necktie and his hair disordered, all indicating the frequent quaffing and replenishment of "the glass which cheers" and *does* inebriate—"Pray tell me, Mr. Chewkle, to what circumstance I am to attribute your visit at, to me, a most inconvenient time?"

"Well, sir, things happens without particularly caring for our convenience," answered Chewkle, with a hiccup, which left a strong odour of some beverage—not green tea—behind it. "We would all like things to fall out jest as we would wish 'em, but they don't, an' it seems as if the more you wish 'em the more they won't."

"Well," said Mr. Grahame, not liking this preface.

"Well," continued Chewkle, "an' when things run cross, we must, if we wants to right 'em, go to work at once, without caring about convenience. At least, them's my sentiments, an' that's my way o' doing business."

"A very proper way, no doubt, my good friend," exclaimed Mr. Grahame, growing yet more anxious, "but pray tell me what *has* happened."

"Well, a very orkurd matter, as things stand," replied Mr. Chewkle.

"What is it?—what is it?" cried Mr. Grahame, feverishly.

"Why, just this—old Wilton's out."

"Out?"

"Yes, out o' quod."

“ Out—out—out of prison ?” gasped Mr. Grahame, clutching at a chair for support.

“ Nothing else,” replied Chewkle, placing his hands behind him, and rocking himself backwards and forwards on his toes and heels, in a very dangerous fashion for one in his state.

“ Escaped—escaped ?” inquired Mr. Grahame, his eyes almost starting out of their sockets.

“ No such luck !” answered Chewkle, “ if he had, he’d a’ soon been nabbed agen, and taken back to ha’ been kept closer than ever.”

“ What do you mean ?—speak out, man ! you are inflicting upon me indescribable torture !” exclaimed Grahame, excitedly. “ Is he—is he dead ?”

“ Dead ! no ; he’s got more lives than a cat, he has. No, sir ; he’s out of quod because he’s been and paid all the money.”

“ Paid the money !” echoed Mr. Grahame, incredulously.

“ Every mag of it, sir—every farthing. He has wiped off the detainer lodged at the gate agen’ him, and he is free to roam about agen.”

Mr. Grahame stood as if thunder-stricken.

“ Impossible !” he ejaculated, like one in a dream.

“ Fact, sir, all the same for that. I saw Scathe, the managing clerk to your solicitor, and he told me all about it. The debts and costs is paid, and Wilton is out. The money has been paid under protest, sir ; so you can’t touch a penny on it until you’ve proved your

right to it by a haction-at-law. Scathe says he don't think anything o' that, because the firm holds a docky-ment, which Wilton has signed in your favour, as 'll put him out o' court slap. Now, what I wants to know is this—is the dockyment he spoke of the same as ——”

Mr. Grahame clutched his wrist, looked around him with trepidation, and raised his finger warningly. Mr. Chewkle hiccuped again, and lowered his tone, and added—

“Is it the same as—as—as you signed for him?”

Mr. Grahame drew a deep breath, but made no reply. Chewkle was a shrewd reader of physiognomy, and obtained the information he sought from the distorted workings of Mr. Grahame's haggard features. He gave vent to his sensations on learning what he sought to know, in a low, prolonged whistle.

“Things is wuss than I took them to be,” he murmured. Then he addressed Mr. Grahame. “Who do you think?” he asked, “it is as has been making himself so very hactive in getting old Wilton out o' Hudson's Hotel*—you won't guess. Why it's that little saffron-jawed imidge, who dropped in so unexpected when you jest finished that bit o' writing for the hobstinate Wilton.”

“My God!” gasped Grahame, “has *he* assisted Wilton?”

“Paid the money, I believe, sir; and is going to

* The Queen's Bench.

stand his friend in the law case," observed Chewkle, emphatically.

Grahame clasped his hands and paced the room in agitation, he passed his feverish fingers convulsively over his temples. "What is to be done—what is to be done?" he cried, "I have commenced to act upon that accursed document. I thought he never, never would come out of prison, but would die there; and urged by the frightfully pressing nature of my necessity—my situation in connection with the estates to which I lay claim—I lodged the deed with my lawyer, and ordered him to proceed upon it. He has commenced—I know he has commenced; the deed is registered—all will be discovered, and—oh, my God! what will ensue?"

"Transportation for life to a dead certainty," replied Chewkle, in slow, emphatic tones. "You'll be called upon to prove the signatur—you can't do that; then, o' course it's a forgery. Well, who did it? You got to show how you come by it—you can't do that; and then you'll be found guilty, and sentenced for life. That's clear, I think."

Mr. Chewkle felt himself, at the conclusion of his speech, seized by the throat.

"Villain," cried Mr. Grahame, froth foaming and bubbling from his mouth. "This was your hellish counsel; but for your infernal suggestion and complicity, I should never have thought of it, but you shall share my fate—my fate—transportation. Oh!

horror, horror—my house—my family! I—I—death—death—”

Mr. Chewkle felt the cold clammy fingers of his antagonist loosen, and as the last words died on his lips, he saw him stagger back, and before he could catch him, he fell to the ground in a fit.

Chewkle's first impulse was to call for help, but instantly it flashed across his mind that he should have a thousand questions to answer, besides being regarded with looks of distrust and suspicion. He had no wish, at that hour, and in the rather free style and state of his costume, to have to encounter the family, to explain that which it was so important should be left unexplained, and he proceeded to attempt himself to play the part of a medical attendant. Mr. Chewkle was stronger than he looked, and he had need of all his strength to pin Mr. Grahame to the floor, during the violent paroxysms of the fit by which he had been seized. He succeeded, by dint of tremendous exertion, in overmastering the desperate struggles of the prostrate man, and when they had ceased, he loosened his neckcloth, obtained some water from a bottle upon the table, bathed his temples and lips with it until Mr. Grahame opened his eyes, and gazed wildly around him, like one waking up out of some dreadful dream.

After a few incoherent expressions, he became once more alive to his position.

He walked up and down his library, wringing his

hands, and displaying the greatest possible mental anguish.

Suddenly he paused before Chewkle, and with a stern countenance, he said—

“Through blindly following your counsel, I have placed myself in a situation of awful peril. Tell me, what must be done to avoid the dreadful degradation with which I am threatened—how is this frightful false step to be retrieved?”

“Not by going on, sir, as if you’d gone stark, staring mad!” answered Chewkle, rather brusquely. “There’s a good deal at stake, you know; and there’s only one way to make the best of a bad game—that’s by being as cool as hicc, and as clear about the head-piece. You must be slow to think and decide, but prompt to hact. You are in a mess, that’s pretty certain; the only way to get out of it, is to be quite calm and easy-like, to calculate your chances carefully, to say not a word to nobody but them you must employ, and fight it out to the last, hinch for hinch.”

This advice seemed tolerably sound, but Mr. Grahame could not reflect calmly, nor calculate coldly; he could do nothing but have shifting visions of the happy time of youth, when he was free from the cares and responsibilities of life, and of the grim, shadowy, future, lying behind a curtain of black and obscure vapour; they were mingled in one picture, whirling and rioting through his aching brain, and incapacitating him from sitting down to plan a scheme, by which he might

escape the consequences of the crime he had committed.

“It is useless,” he said, at length, impatiently, “to expect from me, in my present excitement, any suggestion dictated by cool reflection. My brain is in chaotic confusion; it is racked with agony. I feel that something must instantly be done, but what—what, my good Chewkle, cannot you devise something?—you are cooler than I am.”

“Well, you see, if the wust comes to the wust, sir,” responded Mr. Chewkle, calculatingly, “I shan’t be hit so hard as you; I can afford to be cooler; now my notion is, that the first thing to be done is to get hold of that jeuced dockyment, and when got hold on, to drop it quietly into the fire.”

“A good thought; I’ll send for it at once to my solicitor——”

“They won’t be at the hoffice now,” interposed Chewkle. “You must let me manage it. I’ll be with ’em afore nine to morrow morning, so as to bust upon ’em afore they opens their letters, or commences looking at papers which have been served on ’em in different causes, an’ I’ll be in such a fluster an’ hurry to get back to you, that I’ll get the dockyment out of ’em, instead of being put off with a promise to look it out and send it by a clerk. We can’t wait, you know; we *must* have it; and you’ll see I’ll bring it back with me all right.”

“My best of friends, how can I reward you?” said

Mr. Grahame, clutching at hope and relief from the scheme proposed.

“Well,” said Mr. Chewkle, “a tenner will do for me jest now; I ain’t greedy, though I am short of money.”

Mr. Grahame was here made to understand that a ten pound note was needed; he drew one promptly from his purse, and gave it to Chewkle, who instantly transferred it to his badly worn portmonnaie, which he plunged into the depths of his pocket.

“You must write a note—a strong note—to your solicitor, sir,” he observed, when the money was stowed away, “directing him to give to *me* the deed—mention my name—immediately on the receipt of your note—dash under ‘immediately’—that will throw him off his guard; he will give the dockyment to me; I’ll bring it to you, and then you can destroy it.”

“But it is registered, and that will afford proof that there was such a document,” suggested Mr. Grahame, nervously.

“Yes, that there was, perhaps,” answered Chewkle; “but what of that?—who’s to prove ’andwriting on a thing that ain’t forthcoming?—who’s to substantiate a charge of forgery”——

“Hush! for Heaven’s sake!”

“Well, who’s to substantiate such a charge upon a thing as don’t exist—that can’t be put in in support of the case. It can’t be done.”

“But—but what if proceedings have already com-

menced, and my lawyer is prepared to put in that deed to bar the claim they will make?"

"But he musn't."

"But what if he has this very day? for I urged him to proceed with all speed."

"Well, then we must be prepared to prove that it *is* Wilton's signature."

"That it *is* his?"

"'Zackly. I don't want more in this affair than ourselves, but we musn't be beat while there is a chance of winning. Suppose I swears *I* saw him sign the deed, and suppose old Jukes swears *he* saw him do it, and suppose his follerers, Sudds and dirty Nutty, swears they stood by, and saw it signed—how then? There's nothing can be brought against us to invalidate our evidence, and what could the hother side do then? Old Wilton will swear, of course, hard and fast, that he did not sign, but what then?—you don't appear in the matter? you commissioned me to get it signed, and I brings forard three respectable men, who swears—swears, mind—they saw him sign it; who'll be believed then? he wouldn't have a leg to stand on. These men will be difficult to get, but they've got their price, sir, and are to be had."

All these remarks and suggestions, rascally as they were, afforded comfort to Mr. Grahame. They conveyed to him a glimmering of hope that the difficulty, after all, was not so desperate as he had presumed it to be. He recoiled at the notion of having to work with

such dirty instruments—when, however, did dishonesty and crime ever work with other tools?—but he did not recoil at the work itself.

To obtain a vast advantage, at the price of the misery and destruction of another, would not have occasioned him a moment's remorse, or in any degree have ruffled his equanimity or serenity, but to accomplish that task by the aid of a small knot of low rascals, was the source of extreme annoyance and vexation to him. Still if the object could not be obtained without such assistance, he elected to employ it rather than forego his purpose; they were the means to the end at which he sought to arrive, disagreeable enough, but necessary to the result—and, as such, accepted.

The alternative of stoutly maintaining the forged signature of Wilton to be genuine, had not struck him. The suggestion was a valuable one, and he resolved to treasure it up. It occurred to him that his own word would have weight in a Court of Justice, from the high position which he held in society, and if he repudiated having had anything to do with the signature, or of having been present when it was being signed—he would in all probability be believed, not alone because it would seem the natural course for him, wanting the signature, to have pursued to obtain it, but because it would be considered incredible that he had descended to any unworthy artifice or to crime even, to have possessed himself of it. Its return to his own possession was, however, of the first importance; its

destruction would raise another question, to be settled hereafter. So he sat down, and penned the letter to his solicitor, the outlines of which Chewkle had supplied.

As he completed it, and inclosed it in an envelope, he said to Chewkle—

“I am disturbed to learn that Mr. Gomer has interested himself in Wilton’s favour. That fact tells rather against my interests. He is a singular man is Mr. Gomer.”

“Sing’lar, sir,” echoed Chewkle; “he’s as yallar as a canary; he’s everywhere at once, and people says he’s as rich as ‘creeses,’ though why *they* should be called rich I never could understand, unless it is they grows in profusion, an’ you get ’em at six bunches a penny.”

“He is a very extraordinary man,” said Grahame, musingly; “a very extraordinary man—enormously wealthy. I fear the man—I fear him. I don’t know why, but I feel terrified in his presence, and I shudder when I think of him.”

“He is orful hugly, and that is the truth,” observed Chewkle, emphatically, adding, “don’t talk about him, sir, or I’m blow’d if you won’t find him at your elber. Shouldn’t be surprised to see him walk out o’ the dark at the end of the room there.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, with a slight shudder, as Chewkle jerked his thumb over his left shoulder to the part of the room then in shadow. To

confess the truth, he would not have been surprised, though he might have been appalled, to have seen the apparition of Nathan Gomer in the spot pointed out, but he would not appear to acknowledge so much to Chewkle.

He finished the superscription of the note, and handed it to his agent, saying—

“ You will deliver this to the principal of the firm, and I presume I may expect you here about ten to-morrow morning ?”

“ It will all depend upon what time the principal comes to business in the morning, sir,” answered, Chewkle, “ but I shall be there afore the postman, and I’ll have the deed safe enough, depend on it.”

“ Of course it was this business alone that induced you to come here to-night?” inquired Mr. Grahame, almost fearing to ask, in case there might be further unpleasant communications for him to receive.

“ Nothen’ else, sir,” returned Chewkle, although the bank note was the principal occasion of his visit. “ When I learned the news about Wilton, I thought it my duty to lose no time in letting you know—knowing what I knowed, you know.”

“ Yes, yes, yes—quite right—you did quite right,” observed Grahame, hastily. “ Let me see you with the deed as early as you can in the morning. Good night, Chewkle.”

Mr. Grahame rang for Whelks as he spoke, and was promptly answered by the immediate appearance of

his man, who had applied his ear to the keyhole with most persevering zeal, in the hope to unravel the mystery of Chewkle's audiences with his proud and haughty master, but he had caught nothing—but the ear-ache, which subsequently took him for a walk up and down his bedroom all night, to the doctor's in the morning, afterwards to Covent Garden Market for poppy heads, and subsequently it treated itself to scorching flannel, blistering fermentations, and applications of hot and cold vinegar, until Whelks was nearly pickled.

On the disappearance of his servant and Chewkle, Mr. Grahame returned to his guests with a smiling face and perfect serenity of manner, although every one in the room noticed his haggard aspect and the ghastly whiteness of his face. As he made no complaint, they were too well bred to make any remark, and, exerting himself to please, his pallid anxiousness passed without further observation.

In the meanwhile, Chewkle followed Whelks down stairs. The first twinges of pain were introducing themselves to Whelks' notice. A sensation as if he was being repeatedly stabbed in the ear with a bradawl was the first intimation he had of something unpleasant coming on. He had a dim notion at the same time that Chewkle was addressing him as "guv'nor," but the lunges with the figurative bradawl were so brisk when they once commenced, that he was plunged into the wildest confusion, being for the moment un-

certain whether he was descending to the mat at the foot of the stairs upon his highly-floured locks, or upon his tight patent pumps.

Chewkle, on reaching the hall, however, made him understand that he was anxious to get change for a ten-pound note, and wished to know where he could achieve it; Whelks, who was desirous of holding a little conversation with him, in hopes to worm something out of him, explanatory of the strange and anomalous influence he evidently possessed with the head of the household, offered to accommodate him, having, he said he believed, as much gold in his purse. He produced it, and displayed to the greedy eyes of Chewkle some eighteen or twenty sovereigns.

As Whelks counted out the gold, a storm of stabs set in on the inner portion of his ear, so that he grew embarrassed and handed a number of sovereigns to Chewkle, saying, as his eyes overran with water—

“See if they are right—ow! ow! ow! I’ve the dreadfulest pangs.”

Chewkle counted eleven sovereigns, and said the amount was quite right. He handed the note to Whelks, and thrust the sovereigns into his pocket.

“I was goin’ to say to you, sir,” commenced Whelks, “that I should like to have a ’arf-’our’s chat with you, if—ow! ow! ow! I never. Wheugh! oh, my hear.”

“Bad thing,” said Chewkle, anxious to get off with the extra sovereign; “I should ’ave it hout.”

“ ‘Ave it hout ? ” echoed Whelks, “ hits my hear, sir—ow ! ow ! ow ! ”

“ Yes, yes,” responded Chewkle, inattentive to everything but getting away, “ ‘ave it hout by all means—get it done for a bob. Good night, good night.”

He darted through the doorway, as the porter threw open the door to admit a friend of his own, and made the best of his way to his home.

He lay awake, after getting to bed, for some time, busily plotting ; and, before he dropped asleep, he made up his mind how he would act.

By half-past eight in the morning, he appeared before the door of the offices of Mr. Grahame’s solicitors. He knocked, and the laundress who was setting the clerk’s office “ to rights,” admitted him. He pretended to be surprised that no clerk was there, but on his stating that he had been sent, upon business of the utmost importance, by a client of the firm, and that he must not go back without an answer, the woman accommodated him with a seat.

He sat motionless, but watched her movements closely. He observed her enter an inner apartment the consulting room of the principal. She remained in there some little time, and when she returned, he engaged her in conversation in a chatty, affable, familiar way, silently observing, at the same time, that she placed the key of the inner apartment in a particular spot.

Presently she was summoned to make the breakfast

of one of *her* clients, on another floor, and, telling Chewkle that the clerk would shortly arrive, she left him alone. He watched her, through the keyhole, ascend the stairs, then he heard a door above bang, and her foot reverberating overhead.

With the greatest possible quickness he made for the spot where the key was placed, and, securing it, unlocked the door of the inner apartment, and glided into the room.

He gazed sharply around at the boxes on the shelves, and upon one japanned, large and square, he saw printed in white letters, the name of Grahame, and beneath it the date of the year. He made for it, and opened it noiselessly. It was three parts full of papers. Upon the very top was the deed for which he had come thither. He recognised the endorsement, but he opened it, and at the bottom saw Wilton's signature as Grahame had written it. The sight of the name was sufficient. He carefully closed the box, retreated from the room, replaced the key where he had taken it from, put the deed beneath his waistcoat, and then buttoned his coat over that up to his chin.

He reseated himself in pretty much the same position as that he had taken when the laundress left him, and upon his face he wore a blank expression, leaving it a debateable point whether he was more stupid than innocent.

The clock of a neighbouring church struck nine!

About ten minutes afterwards the door opened, and

a young man about two and twenty entered. He started on seeing Chewkle, and looked as disconcerted as a man who comes suddenly upon a creditor whom he cannot pay, the said creditor being inexorable and rapacious, and money his only pacificator. If such were the clerk's feelings, his apprehensions were relieved by Chewkle stating the object of his visit.

"Governor won't be here till ten," replied the clerk ; "I can't open his letters : and if I did I don't dare give up any papers. You must wait till he comes." He gave Chewkle back the letter and told him to take his seat again, which Chewkle did.

About half-past nine Chewkle said, suddenly, that he wanted to make a call at no great distance off, and he thought he might as well go on that business as sit there doing nothing until ten, by which hour he could certainly be again at the office. The clerk said he thought so too. So Chewkle went leisurely away.

No sooner out of sight of the office than he jumped into a cab, and drove to his own house, and in a secret place deposited in an iron chest, with other articles of value, the deed he had purloined. He locked the chest safely, and once more made his way to the street, where he hired another cab, rattled back to the neighbourhood of the lawyer's office, discharged it, and entered the office at three minutes to ten.

"Governor not here yet," said the clerk ; "sit down."

Chewkle obeyed, looking vacant ; laughing stupidly

when the eye of the clerk caught his. "What a pump," thought the young man.

Chewkle felt slightly uneasy, for fear the managing clerk Scathe should make his appearance and recognise him, but he calculated he was engaged at Westminster, in a cause, and would be hunting up witnesses before he made his appearance at the office.

As the thought passed through his mind, the door was flung open, and the principal of the firm entered. Chewkle rose up and handed him the letter.

"From Mr. Grahame, Regent's Park," he said.

"Oh!" said the solicitor, with a smile. "An answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pray be seated. I will give you one immediately."

The clerk handed to his principal the key of his room; he took it, unlocked the door, and, passing in, closed it after him.

Chewkle sat and waited for the *dénouement*, as if he was engaged counting the letters in the printed notices of sittings in term, stuck up over the fireplace.

Presently a bell rang, and the clerk entered the room, closing the door after him, Chewkle still reading the printed paper. Some time elapsed.

"Somethin's happened, shouldn't wonder," muttered Chewkle, still staring at the printed bill.

By and by the clerk made his appearance, and said o Chewkle—

"Step in, please."

He led the way into the inner apartment, and Chewkle

saw the solicitor with a flushed face and excited countenance, going through the papers in the box with the name of Grahame painted upon it.

"Your name is Chewkle, I believe," said the solicitor, as Chewkle approached him.

"That is my name, and no other, sir," he replied.

"Hem! You were sent hither for a deed by Mr. Grahame—eh?" inquired the lawyer.

"A deed, sir—why, he said 'twas to be a paper packet," returned Chewkle.

"Yes—yes. Do you know what the paper was about?"

"Me, sir?—no, sir."

"Nor why Mr. Grahame is so anxious to have it?"

"Me, sir?—no, sir?"

"Um!—very odd—very remarkable, indeed."

"Mr. Scathe must have got it, or put it somewhere," suggested the clerk.

"I can furnish no other solution of the mystery," answered the principal in the same tone. "But if that is the case, Mr. Scathe is very much to blame, and will not fail to be made acquainted with my opinion to that effect." Then raising his voice, he addressed Chewkle. "Be good enough to tell Mr. Grahame that I will send the deed up to him by one of my clerks."

"He told me to say, sir, that he couldn't wait for that, so I was to bring it with me."

"He could not wait for *that*! What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I s'pose he thought you might be busy

and would put off sending the packet to him until it suited your convenience."

"Ah! I see—um! Well, deliver the message I have given you."

"But he said I warn't to go without it."

"Return to Mr. Grahame, my man, and say I will send it up to—him—by—my—clerk!" exclaimed the solicitor, speaking, under increasing irritation, with marked emphasis.

"Can't go back without it, sir, on no consideration," persisted Chewkle, assuming a dogged manner, "them's my instructions."

The solicitor looked fiercely at him, and raising his voice, said—

"You can't have it. I say—you—can't—have it. It is not come-at-able at this moment! do you understand?"

Chewkle quite understood that. It was certainly not come-at-able, unless some one picked the lock of his iron safe, but he appeared not to comprehend anything, except that he was ordered not to return without a paper.

"Dolt!" growled the solicitor, angrily.

He sat down and penned a note to Mr. Grahame, stating that his managing clerk—as the business was being pushed on—had the deed under his charge; he was at the moment down at Westminster engaged upon a cause, but that on his return the deed should be forwarded to Mr. Grahame.

Folding up his note, and directing it, he gave it to Chewkle, saying—

“Deliver that to Mr. Grahame; ” turning sharply to his clerk, he added, “ Mr. Crumpler, show him out.”

Mr. Crumpler caught Chewkle by the coat sleeve, drew him into the outer office, and pointed significantly to “ the way out.” Chewkle exhibited his teeth—no mistaking them for pearls—to Mr. Crumpler, and obeyed the sign. He descended the stairs rapidly, and moved along the footway of the street, quivering in the throes of what he considered an immense triumph.

“ A hincome for life,” he muttered, “ that deed will be as good as a ’nuity to me. I can bleed Grahame of jest whatever I pleases by threatening of him. I ain’t agoin’ to let him know I’ve got the forged hinstrument, but I shall, in good time, ’int as I knows where it is, and I can keep it dark, or blow it, jest whichever I likes. ‘ Find it and send it up,’ ha! ha! by Mr. Walker I s’pose. They little thinks I nabbed it, none of ’em will ever dream o’ that—I could lay a ’undred to one about that, I could.”

As he offered to lay these very long odds, he ran up against Nathan Gomer.

The visage of the little man shone like burnished gold. His eyes danced and sparkled, and he chuckled as if animated by the most pleasurable emotions.

“ Aha! friend Chewkle,” he exclaimed, placing his cold, fishy hand upon Chewkle’s fevered wrist; “ you

are active this morning—full of business—away from home to a lawyer's office—then hurrying back in a cab to your charmingly retired abode—away in a cab back to the solicitors, and now, ha! ha! eh? I'll be sworn to Mr. Grahame's, in the Regent's Park, with *a* communication—I say *a* communication, he! he! Brisk fellow, sharp fellow, smart dog.” He poked Chewkle in the ribs, and Chewkle felt as if the dent his finger made remained, and would continue a hole for the rest of his life. “Oh” continued Nathan, “I am so partial to sharp fellows, especially when they move about so nimbly to serve others, without a thought of serving themselves, eh, friend Chewkle?—I say without one thought of doing themselves a small turn.”

Chewkle tried to laugh, but no sound issued from his distended jaws. He felt his flesh crawl and creep over his bones, and his marrow vibrate; his scalp seemed to have the “pins and needles,” and his hair to rise slowly up, dust and all, threatening to tilt his hat into the mud.

Nathan grinned at him like a Hindoo idol, nodded, and, diving among the flowing stream of persons ceaselessly passing on, disappeared. Chewkle shuddered, and drew a long breath. “I believe he's the devil himself,” he groaned, and slowly—now doubtfully—pursued his way to Grahame's abode, made very uneasy by the conviction that the secret of his morning's performance was not exclusively confined to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

Tra.—I pray, sir, tell me—is it possible
That love should of a sudden take such hold?

Luc.—Oh, Tranio, till I found it to be true,
I never thought it possible or likely;
But see while idly I stood looking on,
I found the effect of love in idleness.

SHAKSPERE.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

WHEN Hal Vivian and Flora Wilton, summoned by Nathan Gomer, rejoined old Wilton, prior to his departure from the Queen's Bench, they found him at the gate, leading into the ante-chamber or cage, through which every incomer or outgoer must pass, awaiting them.

He appeared, in the eyes of both Flora and Hal, to have become another being.

He was yet meanly clad, his face was still furrowed, and bore the lines of care and sorrow, and his hair straggled loosely and wildly; but there was a brilliancy in his eye, recently so dim; there was a hectic flush upon his cheek, of late wan and pallid; and his figure, some few hours past drooping, the symbol of hopeless

wretchedness, was now erect, firm, and that of a gentleman.

Even the tone of his voice had undergone a change. It had been sharp, though weak and querulous—it was now round and clear, indicating a heart purified and emancipated from the destroying influences of despair.

His manner, which had been that of a grateful and respectful recipient of services, now assumed the character of the power to confer them, not haughtily nor patronisingly, but gently and kindly, still marked by conscious elevation of position.

The golden key, used by some, as yet unknown, good angel, had shot back the bolts of the prison to let Eustace Wilton pass into the free world beyond. The gatekeepers had an instinctive respect for a man who could pay two thousand pounds after so short a detention, so they cast away their brusque, sharp, extra-official impertinence of manner, and obsequiously congratulated him upon his early departure. They expressed their full and decided conviction that he would not quit "Hudson's Hotel" without remembering those attached to the establishment, because, as the spokesman forcibly rather than elegantly observed—

"It was the custom o' gentlemen, as was gentlemen, to act as sech, and to behave accordingly."

Wilton had not forgotten the poor debtors' box, and in the elation of his spirits, could not resist the appeal thus made to him. To the manifest astonishment of Hal Vivian, and to the marvel of Flora, he took from

his purse two sovereigns, and handed them to the gate-keeper, who accepted the amount with a smile, which extended to the visages of two of his brother officers, who were at his elbow prepared to divide the gift as soon as Wilton's back was turned. Nathan Gomer witnessed the act with undisguised disgust, and muttered—

“Ghouls! They fatten on the flesh and blood of the destitute and the wretched.”

He took Wilton by the arm as he spoke, and hurried him through the cage to the entrance, where a cab was waiting to receive the party.

Here Nathan Gomer, after a brief private conference with Wilton, took his leave, and the cab departed for the residence of Mr. Harper.

Wilton was compelled to proceed there; his own dwelling was now a heap of charred and blackened ruins; but he had no intention of staying beneath the roof of Mr. Harper one hour longer than was necessary. He was grateful in his acknowledgments to the good goldsmith and his wife. Once more he also assured Hal that the obligation he had conferred upon him by saving Flora from destruction, was one which he could never repay, and that he should consider himself bound in the future to perform for him any service within his power, when called upon by him to do so.

For two days, old Wilton was constantly occupied abroad. His manner was peculiar and mysterious; he volunteered no explanations, and answered questions

with reserve. He never alluded to the circumstances of his sudden liberation from prison, nor was even Flora made by him acquainted with the means by which it had been effected.

Upon the evening of the second day, he returned to Mr. Harper's residence, and laconically informed the old goldsmith that he had been successful in securing a furnished house; he proposed, therefore, at once to remove himself and his daughter thither, that they might no longer prove a burden to those who had so unexpectedly such an addition made to their numbers, but who had played the part of Samaritans so nobly.

The announcement was listened to with regret by at least one person present, but no objection could be interposed, and before the hour of midnight had arrived, Flora found herself wooing the coy embraces of slumber upon a down bed, in an elegantly furnished bed-chamber, one of a suite in a handsome villa mansion in the Regent's Park.

She had parted with Hal quietly: neither had displayed emotion: what they felt was concealed from the eyes of all present. Their words were few, but each seemed to wish the other to understand that lightly to forget would not be possible.

It was some compensation to Hal for the rude shattering of the ideal fabric he had so blissfully reared, to receive from Mr. Wilton the assurance that the doors of his house would ever be open to him, that he had a

right to enter whenever he pleased, and that he might, in fact, view it as a second home.

“The saviour of my child deserves no less at my hands,” he added.

When Hal Vivian encountered poor Lotte Clinton, he had therefore no hesitation in conveying her direct to the new residence of Flora Wilton. Flora had frequently inquired after her, and had hoped that she would visit her, for she had not forgotten her display of womanly sympathy when she was distracted by a combination of troubles, and she was anxious to express her grateful sense of Lotte’s kindheartedness, and her hope that some day she might be able to repay it.

But Lotte came not. Flora imagined that her brother had conveyed her to some place of residence near his own, and though at times uneasy thoughts would rise and suggest that she might have escaped the horrors of the burning house only to fall into new dangers, still she hoped that she should see her again, smiling and cheerful, as she had been, and in a better position than ever.

Hal knew this, and decided that he could not do better than conduct Lotte to her when he found her in a condition of despair and destitution which had given up all other hope of relief but what self-destruction would afford.

As the cab pursued its way, Lotte sat with her face buried in her hands, weeping. She wished to restrain the violence of her emotions—to attain a calmness which

would enable her to speak to Hal with some degree of steadiness—but in vain ; she had not power to resist the torrent—the floodgates were borne away, and she could only lean in the corner of the vehicle, and let her tears pursue their impetuous course.

It was not that new hopes were awakened, or that she doubted the result of her meeting with Hal. She knew instinctively it would lift her for the moment out of her despairing destitution, but it still rendered her future shadowy and undefined. She must accept pecuniary obligations from him. She shrank from them—needlessly enough—but her fears had by reflection been aroused, and her desperate situation had magnified them into unnatural proportions.

After all, her thoughts were of a very uncertain, half-formed character ; she was too prostrated to think much. She had, with a mind worked up to a pitch of frenzy, stood upon the verge of eternity—a moment more, and she had precipitated herself into the obscure and misty regions of that unmapped land. She had been suddenly held back to renew the battle of life—upon what terms was hidden from her, but the revulsion of feeling occasioned by this recall overmastered all faculties but that of weeping, and left her, as we have stated, absorbed in tears.

Hal sought not to check them. It would be time enough to speak to her when the paroxysm had ceased, or at least abated somewhat of its violence. He hoped then for the return of better feelings ; not that he in-

tended to read her any homily upon the folly and the wickedness of the crime into the commission of which she was hurrying, because he believed that more powerful suggestions than any he could offer would present themselves to her, and because, also, from what little he knew of her nature, he felt fully convinced that the incitement to leap out of life into the dread unknown must have been of a description exceeding the sustaining powers of others gifted even with a higher capacity of endurance than she possessed.

So, for a considerable distance, they rode on in silence.

Her low-drawn sobs had grown gradually wider in the interval of their inspirations, and ultimately the painful sound ceased entirely. Having satisfied himself that she had not fainted, he made a few commonplace observations. Yet not altogether unconnected with the circumstances under which he had fallen in with her at a moment of such intense importance, in order to prove to her that it was a direct interposition of Providence in her behalf.

A faint monosyllable, uttered now and then, was all she returned in reply; for she felt her helpless position most acutely, however grateful she ought to have been for her rescue from an attempt to commit self-destruction, and she was glad when the cab stopped at the address which Hal had given to the driver.

Having dismissed the vehicle, Hal led Lotte up the gravelled path leading to the door of Mr. Wilton's new

residence, and gave a summons at the door with the hand of one who felt he had a right of *entrée* in that house at any time. He was ushered into the hall promptly. It was his first visit. A glance told him the style in which Mr. Wilton—so recently a humble gold-worker to his uncle's establishment—had commenced to live. The hall-porter who opened the door turned his inquiring eyes upon the new comers, uncertain whether to be civil or calmly insulting to them. He had yet to learn the description of visitors whom his new master delighted to honour.

Hal, sensitive, and restive under suspicion as to his status in society, drew a card from his card-case, and in a very decided tone, which sounded like command, said, as he handed the small piece of thin pasteboard to him—

“You will please to say that I am desirous of seeing Miss Wilton, and that I shall esteem it a favour if she will grant me an interview at once and alone.”

The hall-porter instantly summoned a man-servant, dressed in a livery of deep violet hue, and gave him the card and the message.

Scarcely a minute elapsed ere the man reappeared, and bade him follow him.

Hal pressed the arm of Lotte as he felt her cower by his side, overwhelmed by what her dim eyes beheld, and he led her gently in the direction the man had taken. She tottered, and could hardly find strength to walk.

“Courage! courage! Lotte, my good girl: my life for it, you will be tenderly received,” he whispered gently to her.

Oh! she was grateful to him for those encouraging words. But all this grandeur! She could have met Flora readily, if she were as she had until now known her, but to come before her—so hapless a wretch as she deemed herself to be—in the midst of all this luxury and wealth, was only a new trial. She said not a word, but she feared her reception; to be pitied and to be patronised now would be to slay her.

The man ushered them into a small but elegantly furnished apartment: a lamp burned brightly upon the table. Near to it stood Flora Wilton, dressed as Hal had never seen her before. Her attire was such as a princess might have worn—and with pride, for it was costly in its value, and in its taste unimpeachable.

As the light fell full upon her face and form, Hal turned faint. Flora smiled sweetly, and said in a tone musical, half joyous, yet half reproachful—

“I am so glad to see you, Hal!—Mr. Vivian—I—I thought you would have come before; I quite ex——”

She paused, for she suddenly perceived Lotte, who had tremblingly shrunk behind Hal, wishing from the depths of her aching heart she had never, never been induced to come here.

Hal followed the direction of her eyes, and he said, hastily—

“I am grateful, Miss Wilton, for your kind recep-

tion, but to-night, at least, I do not claim it for myself. I have one poor sorrowful heart here with me for whom I entreat your warm interest; she needs it. To ensure your sympathy, I may only suggest that Lotte Clinton"—

Not a word more.

Flora was at the side of Lotte in an instant, with her arm round her waist. The bright rays of the lamp fell upon the thin, white, wasted features of the poor, half-fainting creature. Flora had last seen her a round-faced, pretty, lively, laughing girl. What a dreadful change did she now behold!

She burst into tears.

She twined her arms about Lotte's shoulders; she laid her cold wan face upon her own warm bosom.

"Oh Lotte, Lotte, dear, dear Lotte, what has happened?" she murmured, through her streaming tears; "why are you so dreadfully changed? Confide in me as in a sister—pray, pray do; oh, my heart aches to see you thus; indeed, Lotte, it does; in very truth, it does."

Why, had Flora been grand, had she played the lady, had she offered to take the case presented to her by Hal at an early moment, and promised to do something, Lotte might have been pierced to the heart—but she would then have stood up bravely and haughtily—have declined the intended favour, though she consigned herself to destitution by the act; but to be caught thus to Flora's heart—to be embraced—to have poured

into her ears expressions of tender sympathy—to feel upon her cheeks the tears of human pity, which had the essence of divine pity—to feel, to be convinced that the tender commiseration which Flora—though unknowing the circumstances—had exhibited for her was sincere—it was all—all!—more than she could bear; she sank at Flora's feet, embraced her knees, tried to ejaculate her gratefulness, tried to tell that now, indeed, she felt herself lifted out of despair and degradation; but exhausted nature refused to do more, and she fell back upon the carpet in a swoon.

Hal, who had walked to the end of the apartment, half choked in his efforts to repress the tears which would flow into his eyes, now, at a sudden cry from the lips of Flora, rushed forward, and raised Lotte from the ground, while Flora rang the bell, which brought into the apartment her maid—a young, but strong, good looking, and seemingly good-humoured girl.

Flora beckoned to her.

“Help me to bear this young lady into my dressing-room,” she said; “she has fainted; be very gentle and tender in your movements, Mercy, for she is very ill.”

“Poor dear young lady,” said the girl, gazing upon Lotte's ghastly features. “She do look bad, surely.”

She received her from Hal's custody, and lifting her up in her arms as if she had been a child, she bore her tenderly to Flora's chamber, and laid her gently on the bed. As Flora was following, Hal detained her, and

in a few brief words, acquainted her with the circumstances which had attended his meeting with Lotte; he left her to obtain the rest from her own surmises, or from any communications Lotte might make, and he took the opportunity of bidding her farewell, promising that he would pay a more formal visit, and make a more protracted stay, within a few days.

“Do not fail,” said Flora with some earnestness, “for my father is very anxious to see you here; he has made many inquiries respecting you, and I—I—do hope you will come soon.”

She need have been under no apprehension that he would stay away. Her beauty was a magnet which would have drawn visitors loving her far less passionately than he.

He made his way home, defiantly challenging the ideal to produce such exquisite and perfect loveliness as the real had that night presented to him.

Flora hurried to her chamber, where poor Lotte yet lay senseless. She was too ill that night to leave her bed. She was placed under the careful skill of an eminent physician, who at once declared her illness to be occasioned solely by mental distress, and treated her accordingly.

We may here mention that Mrs. Bantom grew very uneasy when nine o'clock came and Lotte had not come back, and by ten Mr. “Jeems” Bantom was dispatched in search of her, with strong injunctions not to go about his task as if he was anxious to give her into the cus-

tody of the police on a charge of petty larceny, or to act in such a way as to induce persons to believe that he was on the prowl with the view of dishonestly possessing himself of property which "wasn't his'n," but to proceed at once, and make his inquiries in a clear and straightforward manner.

"Jeems" Bantom fortunately possessed the address of the knave for whom Lotte had worked without obtaining her earnings, and he went there direct. He quickly found that the place was shut up, and that the proprietor had "bolted."

"The gal's been done out of her wages," he said, to himself, "and is afeard to come back. She's a hiding of herself somewheres, an' I must find her, else she'll be goin' and doin' somethen foolish. I'd keep that gal jes' the same as I would one of my own kids, rather than any harm should come to her—that I would; 'cos I'm sure she is honest, straightfor'ard, and hard-working. Ah! I'm blessed if ever I saw anyone, woman or man, work so hard as she did over them faddle-daddles wimmen will have, without carin' a farden how many of their own blessed sort they kills in the makin' on 'em. I jes' wish I could get hold o' that cove that got the poor gal to do all that work, and then hooked it. I'd jes' scrag him. I'd make a korps on him, or my name ain't Jem Bantom."

The chances are that if Mr. Bantom had fallen in with him, at the moment, he would have kept his word, or at least have so severely trounced him that his most

intimate friends would, for a lengthened period, have been unable to recognise him.

Bantom was checked at the very place where he expected to obtain information. None of the persons living near to the house where Lotte had called for her money had seen her, and he had to start off to find a clue to her as best he could. He inquired at police-stations, at hospitals, and at cab-ranks, but without gaining any tidings of her; and the night had worn away when he returned to report his ill success.

Mrs. Bantom wrung her hands.

"The poor young lonesome thing 'as drowned herself," she cried, "all along o' the cussed money she told me she owed us. She said she would!—she said she would."

Poor Mrs. Bantom sobbed bitterly as she uttered the last words.

Bantom looked upon Lotte very much as he would upon a dog which he had picked up, brought home, found to possess good qualities, and had grown into a pet. He had found and brought Lotte home, and he felt a personal interest in her, which could not have been created in his breast under any other circumstances. When, therefore, he heard his wife's surmise, he seized his hat, put it on his head, and, tired as he was, prepared to sally forth again.

"Keziah" he said, in a husky tone, "I likes to know the wust, I does—I purfers it. I'm off to the river, I am, jes' to show you you're wrong. Keep

up your pluck, old gal, I'll be back as quick as ever I can."

He went ; traversed both sides of the river between London and Westminster bridges, and crawled home in the morning exhausted, as the clock was striking seven. He threw himself into a chair despondent as ever man in this world was, and said—

"I told you, Keziah, you wus wrong ; nobody has drowneded themselves this blessed night. I've been both sides of the river, from Billin'sgate to Lambeth."

A loud knock at this instant was given at the street-door. Mr. and Mrs. Bantom came into collision at the lock, and both pulled at it together. It was not Lotte who had knocked, and their countenances fell, for, with hearts beating high with hope, they had fully persuaded themselves she had come "home" at last.

A footman in violet livery met their gaze instead.

He looked at husband and wife, and, with the air and manner of a cabinet minister in his court dress, he said, inquiringly—

"Bantom?"

"That's me!" exclaimed husband and wife together.

The footman produced a letter, and handed it to Bantom.

"See if it's all right," he said.

Mr. Bantom could read, but not with ease and rapidity ; he could write, too, but his hand was bold and slightly irregular. He was very nervous this morning

and the handwriting of the superscription was so delicate a fairy might have penned it. He looked at his wife, opened the envelope, and took out a sheet of delicate note paper, which he unclosed. It contained a Bank of England note, which, with trembling fingers, Bantom spread wide.

"A fi'pun note, 'ep my goodness!" he exclaimed, with astonishment. He mechanically handed the paper which had contained the note to the footman.

"You looks like a good scholar," he observed ; " 'jes' read that pretty writing for me."

The footman, with a supercilious smile, not sorry to be put in possession of the contents of the note, read as follows :—

"Lotte sends her kindest love to Mr. and Mrs. Bantom, and begs them to forgive her for any uneasiness she may have occasioned them. She desires to assure them that though ill, she is quite safe."

"A-hah-ha-ah!—ah-a-hah-a!" burst from Bantom's lips, sounds composed of hysterical laughter, and a genuine cry, although the latter was the offspring of joy alone. Mrs. Bantom flung her apron over her head, that the tears she shed might not be visible to the strange young man in violet. She had small need to be ashamed of the honest tears of happiness at the communication thus received of Lotte's safety.

The footman was rather indignant at this interruption, he saw nothing as he said to " 'owl at," and he

requested them to be quiet while he read the remaining contents of the note. They obeyed him, an occasional sigh and sniff from Mrs. Bantom being the only further interruption. The note went on to say that Lotte would see them shortly, but in part payment of what she was indebted to them, she inclosed the note, hoping they would believe she would never forget their kindness to her.

There was joy in Bantom's house that day. His shop was better stocked than usual, and many of the very poor were allowed to have credit, which, under ordinary circumstances, Bantom could not have afforded.

Lotte, on being recovered from her swoon, though very feeble and under strong injunctions not to speak, could not rest until she had unfolded her true condition to Flora, and begged her to let the Bantoms, at least, know that she was safe; that her mysterious absence, as nearly as possible, might be accounted for. We have seen in what manner Flora complied with her wish.

A few days and the tender care and kindness of Flora Wilton were rewarded by the rapidly returning strength of Lotte. She was able to leave her room and to walk in the garden with Flora. These walks in the soft fresh air did much to revive her; the garden was so prettily laid out, the flowers so profuse and beautiful—she loved flowers passionately—that it afforded her considerable pleasure to stroll there in company with her kind friend.

Besides, while most grateful for the affectionate sympathy and generosity of Flora, she had no notion of remaining dependant. She had far too brave a spirit for that, and she felt that these daily walks among the flowers in the bright clear air were bringing back to her health and strength, to renew the labour of bread-winning.

One lovely morning, while strolling with Flora, she said to her lightly—

“The garden adjoining this appears to be extremely beautiful, although it is hardly possible to get a glimpse at it.”

Flora smiled.

“I have discovered already the mysteries of this garden, Lotte. There are several little secret nooks, of which you would never dream, if you had not searched them out. I will take you to one where you can have an unimpeded view of the next garden, and you will say when you see it that it is beautiful indeed.”

Flora at once turned from the path into a narrow alcove of young alder and beech trees, and Lotte followed her. They pursued a winding course for a short distance, and were stopped by a wire fence.

The adjoining garden lay spread out before them in all its cultivated beauty.

But also before them, face to face, within five or six feet, were a party of ladies and gentlemen—

“Good gwacious, Vane,” exclaimed suddenly a tall, bulky, fair young man, “did you evaw in youaw we-

membrance see an angel's face so wavishly beautiful?"

The eyes of the whole party were turned at once upon Flora Wilton.

"Lovely, indeed!" ejaculated Lester Vane, for he, with Helen, Margaret, and Evangeline Grahame, were of the party.

Helen Grahame turned her large dark eyes upon Flora. It was impossible not to acknowledge the extreme loveliness of the fair young face upon which her gaze rested, but a pang of mortification and jealousy penetrated her bosom, for Vane's words rang in her ears, and a glance told her that his eyes were riveted upon Flora's face with an expression of passionate admiration.

The scene lasted but a moment. Flora, abashed and almost terrified, shrank back and hurried away, closely followed by Lotte, who felt like being detected in a somewhat mean act of espionage, though in this she was not just to herself or to her friend.

All that day and night Lester Vane could not forget the face he had momentarily seen. It was before him in the flowers, in the fleecy clouds, in the waters of the fountain, in the shadows of the night. When his eyes in thoughtfulness closed, it was like a star in the misty gloom. Turn which way he would, direct his thoughts to any channel, still the face floated before his vision.

Who was that young and lovely creature—what her name, condition, character?

He determined to ascertain as quickly as he could. He knew that he should be restless and unhappy until he had acquired this information at least.

Had he conceived a sudden absorbing passion for her? Was this love at first sight?

CHAPTER XV.

Great floods have flown
From simple sources ; and great seas have dried ;
When miracles have by the greatest been denied.
Oft expectation fails, and most oft there,
Where most it promises ; and oft it hits
Where hope is coldest, and despair most sits.

SHAKSPERE.

THE PROPOSITION.

MR. GRAHAME entered his library, on the morning following his interview with Chewkle, at least an hour before the time appointed for the return of that individual, with the deed which he had promised to obtain, and of which he had possessed himself—to use as an instrument of extortion.

There was no sound in the library, save the ticking of the valuable and exquisitely finished specimen of handicraft, the skeleton timepiece, upon the broad marble mantel-shelf, for Mr. Grahame sat with hands clasped before him, plunged in profound, and uneasy thought.

But though a death-like stillness pervaded the apartment, there was a terrible storm raging within his bosom.

Mr. Grahame's position was perilous and critical.

On attaining his majority, he had inherited landed property, from which he derived an income of nearly ten thousand a year, and personal property to the value of thirty thousand pounds. He married a near relative of a Scotch Duke, also a Grahame, and kin of many of the proudest—if poorest—families in Scotland. With her he had a dowry of ten thousand pounds; and thus he may be said to have commenced his married life in a station of affluence, and with the brightest prospects of happiness.

But he had, during his minority, been brought up in parsimonious seclusion. Like the majority of his race, he was burdened with an arrogant pride—a pride that would eat toasted herrings and potatoes in state, that would look down in ineffable scorn upon the tradesmen it was too poor to pay—a pride that was essentially inflation, and wholly devoid of true dignity.

When approaching manhood, provided with the narrowest allowance, he had preferred to be chiefly in the glen or on the mountain, where but little money was needed, to mixing with the gay world into which his narrow stipend would have introduced him—slightly above the condition of a beggar. And thus he passed his minority away, yearning for the death of his miserly father, who scraped, and saved, and accumulated, without a thought crossing him that some day the mean and acquisitive spirit which inhabited his frame would take its flight suddenly to the unknown land; and, with

the old and withered trunk it had inhabited, leave all the savings, and dirty hoardings and scrapings behind.

So it turned out. One morning old Grahame was found at the threshold of his bed-room door—a stiff, stark, grinning corpse—and Claverhouse Grahame was declared the inheritor of ten thousand a year, and thirty thousand pounds besides.

Shortly after this, he encountered Margaret Grahame. As she was marriageable, and had ten thousand pounds by way of dowry, he proposed for her hand. How could she refuse ten thousand a year? The possibility of liking Claverhouse Grahame never entered her imagination. She took him as part of the fortune—rather because she could not have the fortune without him, and because the married state was not altogether complete without a husband.

Of love, in its purity and holiness, she had no conception. She considered her father and mother as grand and dignified persons, entitled to filial respect and deference from her. She was passionately fond of state, and pomp, and display, of jewels, of dress, of genealogy—whatever pertained to an elevated position; but an emotion purely disinterested, one equal to a self-sacrifice, she never possessed. She gave her hand to Grahame, because the act brought her ten thousand a year. Her heart was only so far involved in the transaction that it vibrated with pleasure at the prospect of the situation in which such an income would place her.

It was a natural consequence of Grahame's probation, and his wife's immeasurable pride—a pride which, like his, had been confined by the economical style of living adopted by her parents, to enable them to give such a wedding portion with her as he had received—that his imagination should convert the capabilities of ten thousand a year into those of five times the amount, and that, by the same process of mental exaggeration, his forty thousand pounds, should appear inexhaustible.

He proceeded to live as though his income possessed an elasticity which enabled it to stretch to any length, and was startled, at the end of some few years, to find that his forty thousand pounds had not only evaporated, but that his liabilities more than exceeded three years' income. He was too proud to make his wife acquainted with this unpleasant state of his affairs, because it would necessitate suggestions of retrenchment. Now she had formed so large an estimate of her dowry, that he was quite aware she would taunt him with having unjustifiably made away with it, although she had herself spent every shilling of it, and a large sum in addition, in the indulgence of her overweening pride.

She would too, he knew, hurl upon him expressions of contempt, for having inveigled her with so splendid a jointure, from her castle home in the Highlands—where a great deal of dirty state was maintained at a small cost—only to subject her to the degradation of being compelled, when she formed a wish suggested for

the gratification of her darling pride, to take the means of accomplishing it into consideration.

He therefore said not a word to her, and went on as before, save that he looked more closely into his own affairs, raised his rents where possible to the highest limits, forgave no tenant, on any plea, arrears, and squeezed all he could out of renewals of leases. Hard, uncompromising, refusing to spend a shilling on his land, he was hated by the whole tenantry, and when, to gratify the stately dreams of his wife, he paid an annual visit to the castle, his tenants, one and all uttered reluctantly the hurrahs which, under the dark threats of the steward, they gave to greet his arrival.

In spite of his efforts, he found it impossible to pay off his liabilities, and make his income support the style in which he lived. What he contrived to save, his wife expended, growing, as her family increased in years, more arrogantly proud than ever. It was not that she lavished or squandered money, but her tastes were enormously expensive. She bought as an empress, preferring to give many hundreds for rare objects rather than single pounds for articles equally handsome, but more common; and it was these heavy drains upon his resources which kept Mr. Grahame in a perpetual state of embarrassment.

At length many of his debts assumed a pressing character; he shrank from appearing in a tradesman's eyes deficient in funds, and, to obtain ready cash, a first mortgage on a portion of his property was executed.

Once within the vortex, rescue by the aid of his remaining property, without the most rigid curtailment of every unnecessary expense, was utterly hopeless, and at the moment of his forging Wilton's name to the deed which Chewkle had that morning stolen, a few thousand pounds at his bankers was all he possessed to meet heavy engagements, and all the future, for every acre of his lands was in the possession of a mortgagee.

There was, however, an enormous property to which he preferred a claim by right of descent. It was disputed, and in Chancery; the claimants had been many, but they had dwindled down by death to two—himself and Eustace Wilton.

Years back, during the lifetime of the owner of the property, Wilton had lived upon a portion of the estate—a slice of considerable dimensions, and held under a simple document—a deed of gift, though not drawn up by a lawyer. The original owner died suddenly, and, as it was believed, intestate. As he died without issue, and no will could be found, a host of claimants sprang up, and the estate went into Chancery.

Then Wilton was called upon to prove his claim to the estate he held, and to improve which he had expended every sixpence of the fortune he had possessed independent of it. He produced his document. So far as the wording of the instrument went, it had full legal force; but proof was needed that it was in the actual handwriting of the deceased, and that it was in all respects

executed by him in favour of Wilton—given freely, fairly, without coercion, and with the full intention that Wilton should enjoy, have, and hold possession of the estate thus presented to him for ever.

It had been witnessed, but the witness was gone away, no one knew where. The handwriting of the document was questioned, and on the trial to prove Wilton's title to the estate, the weight of evidence for and against its being genuine was divided—if it did preponderate, it was rather against than for him.

The judge held the non-production of the witness to be fatal to the claim, and a verdict was so given. The property was therefore wrested from Wilton; he was turned homeless into the world, with his wife and family, while the estate itself was joined to the other property, and the whole income went into the hands of the receiver appointed by the Court—to be held in trust, disgorged only when a claimant appeared, who could prove his title to inherit it.

In the claim to the property as a whole, Wilton was the nearest of kin, but here again he was debarred for want of a witness, who was believed to be living, but who could not be found.

Grahame's chain of evidence in support of his claim was unbroken, and his title to the property indisputable if Wilton were out of the way. The only thing which debarred Wilton's obtaining the estates was a doubt thrown upon the validity of his mother's marriage. Grahame knew that, and, so far as it went, it was

enough to keep him out of possession. But if Wilton signed a paper waiving all claim to the property, which was at his finger tips, without the power to grasp it, Grahame would, as the only other surviving claimant become entitled to it, and would obtain it; for, as we have said, his chain of evidence proving his right to it, next of kin failing, was complete in all its parts.

It may now be understood how immensely important it was to him to obtain Wilton's signature to a deed which he had had most carefully drawn up, and we have seen the lengths to which he went to obtain it. It may also be understood wherefore Wilton preferred imprisonment, under the strong hope that his much-wanted witness would some day appear, rather than sign a deed which excluded not only himself but his family from the possession of wealth, which was in truth and justice, though not to the satisfaction of the law, actually theirs.

Grahame pondered over the past down to the present despairing moment.

What was now to be done? With the payment of the two bonds given by Wilton while trying his right to possess that which had been given him, he had lost all power by pressure over him: and destitution, perhaps imprisonment, stared him in the face—no, not imprisonment—no, not that.

He opened a drawer, and took out a case, which, with a furtive glance round the chamber, he opened.

It contained within a beautifully-finished pair of pistols. He took one out, and examined it.

"It is loaded," he muttered, "and in good order."

He replaced it in the velvet compartment made to receive it, and returned the case to the drawer, which he closed and locked.

"They are there when needful," he said, between his clenched teeth. "A Grahame knows how to die, but not to endure the degradation of poverty and ignominy. I will never die a pauper's death!" he added, with a fearful oath.

He pressed his hands over his burning forehead, and racked his brain to find a path by which he could conquer his difficulties.

"That usurious wretch, Gomer, has promised me funds upon the very document which before this he must know will not be completed," he muttered. "What is to be done? What if I persist in affirming that the signature has been given, and act upon the man Chewkle's advice, suborn the men he named, and boldly claim the whole property? It is an enormous prize, and worth the risk. I can pay the villains well to hold their tongues until I am fairly in possession, and then—then—who knows—at some carouse at which *all* are assembled to celebrate their success—something in their drink may make them sleep—sleep to the day of doom. I do not like the man, Chewkle; the scoundrel is beginning to grow insultingly familiar, and will, I foresee, ere long assume a mastery over me. I must

especially direct my attention to his permanent welfare. When, by his aid, my scheme is consummated, then—then if he escapes what I shall prepare for him, his good fortune will be a marvel”——

“Mr. Chewkle, sir!” exclaimed a servant, suddenly throwing open the library door.

Mr. Grahame’s heart leaped within him, and it palpitated painfully, but he exhibited his accustomed cold *hauteur*.

“Show him in!” he exclaimed.

Chewkle entered with the air of a chap-fallen, disappointed man. His manner presented a strong contrast to the half-drunken, offensive, easy indifference it had displayed the evening before.

Mr. Grahame detected it instantly; he replied to Chewkle’s bow by an inclination of the head, and pointed to a chair upon the edge of which Mr. Chewkle gently sank, poising himself when there with the skill of a performer on the tight rope.

“You have obtained the deed, Chewkle,” said Mr. Grahame—“that of course.”

“Well, no sir,” returned Chewkle, “not quite. I entertained ’igh, very ’igh hopes, but they has been chucked down into the deeps of the greatest disappointment. Them lawyers, sir”——

“What do you mean?—they did not refuse to give it to you?” asked Mr. Grahame, hastily and sternly.

“Why, no, not quite that, sir.”

“Then where is it?”

“That’s jest it—where is it, sir? That’s jest what I should like to know.”

“What do you mean?” cried Mr. Grahame, springing to his feet with a countenance of alarm. “You do not mean to say it has been stolen?”

“Stolen!” cried Chewkle, leaping up with a face suddenly of the hue of scarlet. “That would be too good a joke, too. Who’d prig such a thing as that, I’d like to know?”

“Explain yourself, man! You are speaking in enigmas!” cried Mr. Grahame, excitedly.

Mr. Chewkle drew from out of a dirty piece of light brown paper—which had been employed in the task of enclosing half-a-pound of “moist” sugar—the letter he received from the solicitor.

Mr. Grahame snatched it from him, and tore it open. He read the contents twice, and then sat down and reflected for a minute.

“There is nothing, Chewkle,” he said, more composedly, “that I perceive in this communication to occasion alarm: the deed will be sent here to day by one of the clerks.”

“I hopes it may,” observed Chewkle, laconically.

“In the meantime, my good friend,” said Grahame, assuming a bland tone, “I have been pondering over the situation, and I am afraid we have gone a little too far to pause now, or to retrace our steps.”

“We,” echoed Chewkle, opening his eyes widely.

“Yes,” continued Mr. Grahame; “if I stand in the

position of a principal in the affair, you take the part of an accessory before the fact, and a very important one you are, too, inasmuch as you counselled the deed, and instructed me how to perform it, lending your assistance throughout."

Mr. Chewkle would have here interposed some very emphatic observations, but that Mr. Grahame checked him, and continued speaking.

"It is not my intention," he said, "or my wish that the conversation should assume its present tone. I would rather that it took a shape which, while it consulted my interest, gave liberal promise of rich advantages to you."

Chewkle pricked up his ears.

"Last night, if you remember," said Mr. Grahame, slowly fixing his eye firmly upon that of his "agent," "you threw out several suggestions calculated to afford me, in the distress of mind under which I was labouring, a very considerable degree of consolation. Do you remember this?"

Chewkle caught hold of his dusty, shaggy whiskers at the roots, and drew them out to their full extent with the tips of his fingers and thumb several times, to appear the unconscious act of a man plunged in reflection. Presently he said—

"Ain't altogether certain as I does."

Mr. Grahame now repeated the plan which he had the previous evening proposed to accomplish by the aid of Mr. Jukes and his companions, by which, in spite of

all Wilton's protestations and oaths to the contrary, the signature was to be sworn to as being *bonâ fide* and genuine.

Chewkle listened in silence, and when Mr. Grahame concluded by observing that he had almost decided upon adopting it, Mr. Chewkle felt himself to be unpleasantly situated upon the horns of a dilemma. Mr. Grahame had been candid enough to acknowledge that, unless he obtained the estate, he would be lost, destroyed, unable to reward the services of any person; but that if he, by the assistance of "zealous friends," succeeded in securing it, the most magnificent recompense should be bestowed upon them.

Mr. Chewkle's difficulty consisted in having possession of the deed. If he retained it, it seemed that Mr. Grahame would be reduced to poverty, and his *exposé* of the guilty act of forgery would bring him nothing, perhaps, but the questionable advantage of being brought under the anxious consideration of a judge and jury, as a *particeps criminis*. If he gave it up to Mr. Grahame, he would have to account for its possession, an acknowledgment of the truth would place him at once in the power of Mr. Grahame, who could give him, if he pleased, into the custody of the police as a thief.

There was, certainly, no middle course to steer, save waiting for a little while, to see what direction matters would take. He reflected that it would be wise not to be precipitate, but that it would be best to carefully con-

sider whether there was a safe way to hit upon, which would conduct him out of his perplexing position. He began to fear he had been too hasty in securing the deed. The possession now seemed to be by no means so valuable to him, as it had done, when he locked it up carefully in his iron safe. The figure of Nathan Gomer kept dancing before his eyes, too, in the most disagreeable fashion—it was embarrassingly suggestive, and it disturbed him.

Mr. Grahame awaited his opinion upon the adoption of the desperate course with impatience, and at length said, hastily—

“Why are you silent? Does the intention to carry out your own suggestion startle and terrify you?”

“No,” he replied, “it is not that; but swearing point blank in a court of law that a signature to a deed was written by a man whose hand never went near it, and in the teeth of his oath to the contrary, ain’t altogether to be done without a good deal o’ consideration and arrangement.”

“Granted.”

“And—don’t you think it will be the best plan to wait until you have got the deed back in your own hands?”

“No—wherefore? It is in the custody of my solicitor”——

“I ain’t so sure about that,” suggested Chewkle, artfully but uncomfortably. “He could not find it this morning”——

“Bah! His managing clerk has it safe enough; he will proceed by the proper legal course to claim the estate which this waiver of Wilton’s at once will put me in possession of. Of course Wilton will dispute it. We shall swear he signed to be released from the judgments we held against him, prove his signature on oath, I obtain the estate, and you and your friends a rich reward. Therefore, having finally resolved to pursue this plan, the deed cannot be better placed than where it is now.”

Mr. Chewkle shook his head. He had rather the deed had been anywhere but where it now was. He, however, interposed no further objection, but suggested that he should pay a visit to Messrs. Jukes and Nutty to sound them upon the matter.

“You see, sir, this plan makes us commit perjury as well as forgery,” he exclaimed, laying such emphasis on the two crimes, that Mr. Grahame started, and involuntarily shuddered. “Now,” he continued, “it is not every man who has the pluck to take a false oath and stick to it—stick to it, that’s the rub, sir. Taking a false oath ain’t much, but it’s when the counsel begins to badger you, and to ask you this question and that, sometimes about the subjeck, and sometimes about things as has nothen to do with it, and then comes slap back to the subjeck again, so as to jerk a contradictory confession out on you; it’s that as tries you. I ain’t got much doubt about Jukes; he can stand any amount o’ cross-examining, he can, but it’s t’other I

ain't certain about. However, I will go onto 'em at once, sound 'em cautiously without using any names "——

"Right," observed Mr. Grahame, approvingly.

"And if they agrees, I will come to terms with them ; and if they don't, sir "——

"We must get some one else," suggested Mr. Grahame.

Chewkle passed his hand over his chin.

"Yes," he replied, "that is, if they are to be got."

Very few words more were interchanged between them ere Mr. Chewkle quitted the house, cursing the deed which he had with such an exercise of cunning purloined, and which would require so much ingenuity to restore, and leave him unsuspected of the theft.

"PERJURY and FORGERY !" exclaimed Mr. Grahame, as soon as he knew himself to be alone. "This is hastening on in the career of crime. What if some voice were to howl in the ear of Mistress Grahame that her husband was a perjurer and a forger! A Grahame, one of the race that has prided itself upon never having cowered under the taint of dishonour—a wretched criminal—liable to be dragged, with all the horrors of the lowest degradation, to the bar of justice, thence to work out in chains a fearful servitude, in the company of wretches the most desperate. Into what a frightful position has my pecuniary embarrassment hurled me? Henceforth I shall live in perpetual horror of discovery, of being called upon at any moment to face an officer to "——

A loud, single knock at the library door at this moment made his heart leap into his mouth, and nearly caused him to scream with fright, but that his voice forsook him. Before he could recover sufficiently to accord permission to enter, Nathan Gomer walked into the room.

Pale and haggard, Mr. Grahame regarded him with any other feeling than that of complacency. Nathan Gomer held mortgages on his property, and had advanced money on a bond; the day of payment named in it was fast approaching. He had also promised, upon certain security, to furnish additional funds. Mr. Grahame could only look upon him with the eyes of one deeply indebted to him; he believed that he would realise some portion of the sums he had loaned, but he knew that if fate proved adverse to him, Nathan would lose largely as well. He both hated and feared him, and he viewed his presence now with distrust. He anticipated that he was the harbinger of bad news: everything had gone so wrong of late, there was nothing else to expect.

Nathan Gomer turned up his shining yellow visage, and grinned. How Grahame loathed that grin!—it seemed to betoken only mischief.

He motioned to Nathan to take a chair, and, in a husky voice, begged to be informed what fortunate circumstance it was to which he was indebted for the felicity his presence thus unannounced, afforded him.

“A matter I apprehend of no small importance to you, Mr. Grahame,” replied Nathan.

Mr. Grahame gulped. No doubt it was of importance to him; he expected that—most painful importance. What else could it be.

“I think I am prepared,” he said, “for anything you may have to communicate to me, whatever distressing features it may possess.”

“I think not,” said Nathan. “Hearken: you have a new neighbour next door to you;” he pointed as he spoke, and asked—“Do you know his name?”

Mr. Grahame looked at him with some surprise. What did such a question portend?

Nathan only grinned, and Mr. Grahame answered coldly—

“I am not accustomed to take any notice of my neighbours, or trouble myself to make inquiries respecting them.”

“You would have been interested if you had, in the present instance.”

“Indeed!” ejaculated Grahame, a curl turning his lip.

“Ay! His name is Wilton—Eustace Wilton—ah, you are interested now.”

Mr. Grahame clutched Nathan by the arm.

“What?” he shouted, “the wretched man dying inch by inch in his poverty—a day or so back in the Queen’s Prison, and now”——

“Your next door neighbour, with an income of five

thousand a-year, and cash to the tune of sixty thousand pounds," replied Nathan Gomer, with forcible emphasis.

"Impossible!" groaned Grahame.

"Fact!" ejaculated Gomer.

"By what magic has it been accomplished?" inquired Grahame, apparently stupefied by what he heard.

"No magic at all," returned Nathan Gomer, grinning. "A simple process of law. Years ago a near relative, named Eglinton, a connection of your own, gave to him an estate"——

"Which the law took from him, exposing a trumped up"——

"Gently, Mr. Grahame, be careful what you say until you have heard more. When our tongues run away with us, we have sometimes occasion to lament the want of a curb. This estate was taken from him by the Court of Chancery, because he failed only to produce the attesting witness."

"Tush! the witness was a fiction, an imaginary person, who"——

"Has recently returned from India, a colonel in the East India Service, and sufficiently tangible to satisfy the law. This officer has not only sworn to the genuineness of the deed of gift, but has proved its validity, by giving information of the existence of a duplicate lodged by Eglinton himself in the hands of a solicitor long since retired from practice. This has been produced, attested to the satisfaction of the Chancellor, and

the estate, together with the large arrears accumulated, are in the process of being restored to Wilton."

Mr. Grahame listened in grim silence. He felt choking, with spite and envy. The man he had pressed to the verge of despair, in the hope to compel him to sign away his birthright, was now immeasurably his superior in position as he was his equal in descent. He would be a formidable antagonist to fight with the miserable deed he had forged. He could not dare to attempt it.

He fell back in his chair with a groan. Nathan Gomer had brought him ill news indeed. He had expected foul tidings, yet not such as this. He could have wept scalding tears of bitterness, vexation, and rage. He bit his white and trembling lips, and exerting himself to control his tremulous voice, he said—

"It is to give me this information you have waited upon me, Mr. Gomer, I suppose, and with no other object?" The misty shapes dancing before his eyes began to take the distinct form of a pistol with which he had resolved to anticipate the thunderbolt hovering over to crush him.

"I have another object, calculated, I think, to prove vastly advantageous to you," returned Nathan, with a grin. "You know I have your interest at heart," he grinned again; "and I wish to serve you—in my own way." He rubbed his hands, and grinned again, then he went on. "You and Wilton are the claimants to the whole of old Eglinton's property. Wilton wants a witness—you

want—Wilton dead—hem! All this time, neither of you are deriving any benefit from the property. Now supposing you and Wilton were to unite your claims and possess it jointly; the sum accumulated in arrears is enormous, and the yearly rental largely improved since Eglinton's death, is at least thirty thousand a-year. Now, an income of fifteen thousand pounds sterling, with half the enormous sum in cash for each, would not be so bad, I conceive! The money would be doing more good, I suspect—administering to the comforts, the pleasures, the enjoyments of yourselves and respective families—than it will in swelling the millions already held in trust by the Court of Chancery. How say you, Mr. Grahame—what is your opinion of my proposition?"

All the time Nathan Gomer was speaking, Mr. Grahame experienced a variety of emotions. He was cold and hot by turns—now his knees quivered, and his teeth chattered—anon he burnt as if scorched by fever. What burst of sunshine was this on a heart almost buried in a dense, life-destroying gloom? What sudden saving hand was this lifting him up out of the engulfing quicksands of almost fathomless debt, and placing him upon a rock firm enough to stand the shock of any storm? What haven of safety was this stretching out its unassailable arms to receive him into its secure shelter, even while sinking beneath the hurricane raging around him?

Did he hear aright? Had Nathan Gomer come

hither only to taunt him? The gold-faced dwarf, albeit he grinned, seemed to be perfectly earnest and sincere in his proposition, and had, no doubt, good grounds for making it.

It struck Grahame suddenly that Wilton had, perhaps, ascertained that his chance of obtaining any of the property beyond what he had recovered, was hopeless, and, therefore, now sought by a stratagem to secure half. If this were the fact, there was nothing to bar Grahame's claim to all, and the splendid income, with the immense sum in ready cash, roused his avarice—it dazzled his vision. Not a farthing should Wilton have, if he could obtain all—all. What a grand thing it would be to possess himself of all! He did not observe how keenly Nathan was perusing his features, nor conceive with what skilled eyes he read in their changing expression the thoughts which were passing through his mind. He little thought how bare his base greed lay before the man from whom, of all others, he would have most concealed it.

After a pause purposely made by him to reduce his tone of voice and his manner to an attitude of perfect calm, he said to Nathan—

“Your friend Wilton of course suggested this proposition?”

“He does not even dream of it,” was the reply. “On the contrary, he is most sanguine of shortly discovering the witness who can prove the validity of his mother's marriage with his father. Certainly his chances

of doing so are such as to bar any other claim to the property, until it is proved to the satisfaction of the Court that all his efforts have hopelessly failed. In the meantime, you have heavy liabilities approaching maturity. You best know what resources you possess to meet them, and if they are not unquestionable and beyond the reach of casualties, it seems to me you ought to leap with gladness at the chance of suddenly acquiring the wealth my suggestion would place within your reach."

Mr. Grahame thought for a moment ; his present position was very ugly ; still he could not bring himself to think a proposition so extraordinary as this would be made to him unless his chances of obtaining the property had, in some manner unknown to himself, materially improved. Now if he could elicit this, he would not, for an instant, hesitate to decline to accede to the terms, and with this object he commenced to cross-examine Nathan Gomer ; but before he had completed a sentence a servant entered with a letter.

Mr. Grahame recognised the superscription as his lawyer's handwriting, and saying to Gomer hastily—" Pardon me," he tore it open, and read its contents. They were to inform him that the managing clerk of the firm having returned, it was ascertained that he had not had the deed ; it must, therefore, be unfortunately mislaid. Mr. Grahame was assured that prompt steps would be taken to recover it, but if they failed, the usual course to discover any article of importance, miss-

ing or stolen, would be adopted without the least loss of time.

Mr. Grahame was aghast at this information. That the deed was lost or stolen was clear. In either case, his position was painfully embarrassing. The proposal of Nathan Gomer was, therefore, a harbour of refuge to be secured instantan to be secured at all; so he turned to him, and said, quickly—

“What reason have you to suppose that Wilton will meet your views, if he is in the position in this affair which you declare him to be?”

“It is unnecessary to give my reason. Will you have an interview with him upon the subject?”

“Oh—yes—yes—readily! When shall it take place?”

“Now!”

“Now?”

“This minute, if you will. I know that he is at home.”

“This is so sudden that”—

“I hardly imagine the possession of fifteen thousand a-year can occur too soon for your peace and safety, Mr. Grahame.”

“Lead on, sir. I will accompany you.”

Within five minutes from that time, Nathan Gomer and Mr. Grahame were ushered into Mr. Wilton’s library.

The persecutor and the persecuted stood face to face.

CHAPTER XVI.

But most the proud Honoria fear'd th' event,
And thought to her alone the vision sent :
Her guilt presents to her distracted mind
Heaven's justice.

DRYDEN.

SELFISHNESS AND SORROW.

IF Flora Wilton's lovely countenance had so remarkable an effect upon the Duke of St. Allborne, and specially upon the heart of the Honorable Lester Vane, it is very certain that the persons of those gentlemen made no such impression either upon Flora or even Lotte. Both were so embarrassed at their sudden intrusion, as it appeared, upon the privacy of the party in the adjoining garden, that they hurried away without taking particular notice of the individuals composing it.

But both Flora and Lotte had a floating impression that one of the gentlemen there had large, deep, dark eyes ; and that he used them too unreservedly and unscrupulously. Flora had also an idea of a fair, young, gentle face, the soft eyes of which regarded her with tenderness and admiration.

Beyond this, nothing was retained in their minds of the persons they had encountered. Flora only laughingly suggested that she should scarcely attempt again to observe her neighbour's garden from that point of view.

Both girls had quite overlooked Malcolm Grahame ; but if the Duke and Lester Vane were struck by the beauty of Flora's face, so was Malcolm by that of Lotte. It was precisely of that order of prettiness which especially commended itself to his taste. Selfish and proud as his mother, silly and conceited too, there was not much space in his heart for affection ; nevertheless, passion occupied a tolerably large space, and the gratification of it was a first consideration with him.

In his eyes Lotte was the "prettiest" girl he had yet seen, and to call the prettiest girl in the kingdom his was an ambition. He did not count the cost even to the poor girl who was to be captured and wear his chains. He had found satins and jewels, and golden gifts achieve wonders ; he believed there was no limit to their efficacy in conquering a woman's scruples, and he had the strongest possible conviction that, if employed without reserve or hesitation, the most severely rigid propriety would succumb to their influence.

To be smitten with the face of Lotte was to desire to obtain her. He viewed it as a question of time and money, and he made a memorandum in his note-book to that effect.

Lotte, thus favoured by his admiration and his inten-

tions, had not observed him; if she had, she would have forgotten him immediately afterwards.

No; her thoughts were employed upon the future. Under the care and kindness of Flora, she had in one short week won back more strength and health than she would have done in a month under the roof of Mrs. Bantom, or such an one as she could herself afford. It must be remembered, too, that her mind was at peace in respect to the present, and hopeful as regarded the future.

One week longer she decided to stay beneath the roof of her good friend, and then into the world again, that she might eat the bread for which her own hands had laboured successfully. It was in vain that Flora endeavoured to change her determination; her self-dependent nature and free spirit recoiled from being indebted even to Flora for a home. So long as she had strength to work, and was able to obtain it, she would support herself until she became the wife of the man she had yet to see and love, and then if able to keep her, she would accept the luxury the wedded state might afford her; if not, they would work together, and together win a living for both.

She did not refuse to accept from Flora a complete stock of clothes, nor the loan of a small sum of money to start with, nor did she ridiculously refuse her proffered assistance in procuring an apartment in a respectable dwelling; nor when Flora urged upon her to employ her abilities upon some description of needle-

work less slavish and better paid than cap-front making, did she refuse to make the effort, or hesitate to accept work from a juvenile clothing warehouse, obtained through the influence of Flora's new dressmaker.

Her spirit of independence was neither fastidious nor affected; it was genuine, sincere, and directed her along a path that, while by her open, ingenuous, cheerful, loving disposition, she gained the affection of all who knew her, she commanded their respect by eschewing all obligations calculated to fetter her freedom of action.

Malcolm Grahame, during the last few days of his stay, had contrived to ascertain her name, and the information that she was a humble friend of Miss Wilton's—a communication he received with great satisfaction, because it intimated that she was poor. To be poor was to be accessible to temptation, and he resolved to use gold profusely to gain her.

He little thought while making this ignoble calculation, that he himself stood on the very brink of a degraded beggary. Lotte was poor, but her poverty had no blur of dishonour upon it.

He caught sight of her walking alone in the garden several times, and rushed to an upper window to waft a kiss *viâ* his fingers to her, or to lay his hand upon the left side of a rather narrow chest, or to render himself conspicuously ridiculous in other ways. His vagaries were uselessly performed and expended without result, for Lotte did not once perceive him, and left the roof of Flora Wilton, in the Regent's Park, without

knowing, or desiring to know, that any such vain, heartless coxcomb as Malcolm Grahame was in existence.

The interview between old Wilton and Grahame was brief; on the side of the former, it was conducted with cold dignity, and on the latter—after two or three revelations were made which yet further opened his eyes to the tremendous character of the gulf, on the verge of which he had stood with so slippery a footing—with an oily obsequiousness which was contemptible.

Nathan Gomer conducted the whole proceedings, and displayed an influence over Wilton, the more extraordinary as it was evidently not obtained at the price of pecuniary obligations. The preliminaries were all arranged, Mr. Grahame consenting to terms which gave him the enjoyment of half the property and surplus funds in trust, until the claim of Wilton was fully substantiated, when Mr. Grahame was to resign his half, and enter upon arrangements by which he would gradually restore to the estate the sums he had received from it.

The arrangement was far from being a satisfactory one to Grahame, but his position was that of a drowning man, and, therefore, he was only too glad to seize anything that floated within his reach, by which he might support himself for a time, if not save himself altogether.

A memorandum was drawn up by Nathan, who grinned as he composed it, grinned as Grahame signed

it, and grinned yet more when he appended his name as a witness to it. He even laughed a fat, chuckling laugh as he drew Grahame's attention to the fact, that the sheet of paper, upon which the memorandum was executed, bore the proper stamp.

It was Grahame's turn to smile when, throwing a cold doubt upon the realisation of the estates to be thus divided, Gomer laconically requested him to furnish him with a list of his most pressing engagements, and he would at once liquidate them.

"I have some thousands lying idle at my bankers," he said. "I may as well realize a slightly better percentage from you."

"And the security?" questioned Grahame, doubtfully.

"I require nothing more than your acknowledgment of the amounts advanced, and your copy of this memorandum," replied Gomer.

Grahame assented delightedly, and would have taken the most affectionate farewell of both Wilton and Nathan Gomer, but that the former coldly repelled him, and the latter grinned in his face in a manner so strangely impish that he involuntarily shuddered, and hastened away.

As he descended the stairs, he encountered Flora Wilton, just as she was entering her favourite sitting-room, a small one overlooking the garden.

He started as he caught sight of her upturned face, and turning to Nathan Gomer, who was following him, he said—

“Miss Wilton, I presume.”

Nathan nodded.

“How strikingly beautiful!” he ejaculated. “Pray introduce me,” he added.

Gomer did so briefly, saying—

“You will soon have the opportunity of knowing each other better.”

“In truth, Mr. Gomer,” exclaimed Mr. Grahame, in his grandest manner, “I shall look forward with impatience for that honour, I need not add, and high gratification.”

Flora could only look timidly from one to the other, and feel extremely relieved by the absence of both.

Nathan Gomer having, ere they parted, reiterated his promise of supplying Mr. Grahame with all the funds his present need required, that gentleman walked into his mansion with the cold loftiness of a Sultan, and with high elation of spirits. Not that the latter emotion rendered him cheerful; on the contrary, it expanded and inflated his pride—it made him look over to the verge of the horizon, and believe the lands and domains between were his own. It made him regard his servants as serfs, his tradespeople as vassals, his acquaintances as persons who lived only to bask in the sunshine of his smiles, himself an imperial personage, to whom it was the duty of the world in general to bow down and worship.

During the last ten days, he had felt rather disposed to sneak out of sight than to exhibit his greatness to

wondering eyes. Now, removed from the danger of imminent disgrace, his own grand staircase appeared too circumscribed for the majesty of his presence.

Whelks, who had—by hot lotions and cold lotions, and fomentations, and blistering garlic, new flannel, a couple of calomel pills, and a half-a-pint of black draught—subdued the ear-ache, lost a sovereign—how, he was mystified in imagining—and taken the form of a ghostly shadow—noticed the change in his master, but with infinitely less surprise than that alteration which made him almost familiar with Chewkle.

With the instinctive perception of individuals of his class, he presumed, by the ascendancy of the commission agent, that “something was up.” He was extremely anxious to find out what: hence, his civility to Chewkle, and his desire to form an acquaintance with him. Whatever that something was, it was plain, by his master’s resumption of stern pomposity that it was “down again.”

Mr. Grahame, preceded by Whelks, entered the room in which he expected to find Mrs. Grahame and one at least of her daughters, but the whole family as well as the two guests, who had been prevailed to extend their visit beyond the term originally intended, were assembled together, engaged in conversation, which did not pause for an instant at the appearance of Mr. Grahame.

“Can it be pawsible, Lady Mawgawet,” exclaimed the young Duke, addressing Miss Margaret Grahame, using

the prefix "Lady" as he said in "playfulness," "that you did not considaw that that young cweachaw wejoices in one of the fawest, divinest faces, ever pwesented by the wosy goddess Beauty to one of youaw chawming sex?"

"I scarcely noticed the person," returned Margaret, in a cold, supercilious tone, bending her half-closed eyes upon a magnificently jewelled bracelet, clasping her fat white arm, which she placed in various positions to study the effect of the ornament, and to admire trinket and arm together.

Helen looked up at the Duke with a quick action and a glittering eye. She said in a slightly petulant tone—

"Wax dolls have the 'fairest, divinest faces,' my lord Duke, yet we do not fall into raptures with them."

"Not *we*, assuredly Miss Grahame," observed Lester Vane, slowly, "but little children do. In their eyes dolls' faces possess immense attractions, and they have a title to be ranked as the best judges of beauty in dolls, as"—

He paused, and looked into Helen's eyes.

"As men lay claim to be of loveliness in woman," she responded, with a scarcely perceptible sneer.

He bowed.

"As, indeed, they ought to be," he rejoined, quickly; "else why are your sex so desirous to obtain the approving admiration of ours?"

"A fallacy, which your sex has the impertinence to

assert, and the fatuity to believe," she responded with a curling lip.

"A shrewd imbecility, nevertheless," returned Vane, smiling meaningly. "What say you, Miss Evangeline?"

"Indeed, I think she had the sweetest face I ever beheld!" exclaimed Evangeline, with an enthusiasm which afflicted Mrs. Grahame—if that lady permitted any emotion, residing soberly within her well-ordered frame, to agitate itself to the extent of affliction.

"Pish!" cried Malcolm, "you like dolls, even now. The fact is, you are all at fault; the companion was the prettiest of the two."

"What, haw maid?" inquired the Duke, extending his eyebrows half way up his forehead.

"No, her friend. I have seen them arm in arm. None of you looked at her face; I did—she had the prettiest in Christendom, St. Allborne, all the world to nothing."

"May I, without inadvertence, inquire whose merits you are discussing?" inquired Mr. Grahame, with a loftiness he had for some time not displayed.

"I have been listening in pain and astonishment," responded Mrs. Grahame; "the subject is some creature who suddenly intruded herself upon your family and your guests in your garden, Mr. Grahame."

"Intruded herself in my garden!" exclaimed Mr. Grahame, in a tone of outraged dignity.

"His grace, perhaps, will repeat the romantic story?" added Mrs. Grahame.

"Oh, weadily, weadily! you are wight, madam, the stowy is womantic," returned the Duke, with vivacity. "The fact is, my deaw host," continued he, "we weaw all in the gawden the othaw mawning; we had awested owaw steps for a few seconds, when, all of a moment, an appawtition of angelic beauty pwesented itself to owaw dazzled eyes."

"In my garden!" exclaimed Mr. Grahame, fiercely, as much as to say, "how dare apparitions of angelic beauty present themselves in *my* garden?"

"No," returned the Duke, "in the next gawden to the left. She wemained but faw an instant, and then disapeawed. We aw divided in opinion with wespect to haw chawms."

The manner of Mr. Grahame in a moment strangely altered its character.

"The young lady is exquisitely beautiful!" he exclaimed, with an emphasis which made Mrs. Grahame slowly elongate upwards and Margaret Claverhouse open her eyes to their full extent, while the others looked at him with surprise.

At length Mrs. Grahame found a tongue.

"I should have hardly conceived that such a person had attracted the notice of Claver'se Grahame!" she exclaimed, in a tone of contemptuous surprise.

"I have just returned from a visit to the young lady's father," he returned, sharply stung by the tone of his wife's remark.

Mrs. Grahame knew not how to support this dreadful wound to her pride; her upper lip trembled.

"Pray, Mr. Grahame," she said, "have you been seized by the weakness of toadying to some man, some person, some mushroom trader, because he has been able to make a little parade by successful plunder?"

"Stay, Mistress Grahame," exclaimed Mr. Grahame, with imperious grandeur. "Before you suffer yourself to be betrayed into any observation you may be disposed hereafter to recall, let me inform you that Mr. Wilton, the father of the young lady of whom you appear to speak and think so slightly, is a gentleman possessing twenty thousand a year, and cash to the extent of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds"—

An exclamation burst from the lips of all present. Mrs. Grahame felt that she had been premature. How Margaret began to hate Flora!

"Let me add," continued Mr. Grahame, "that Mr. Wilton can claim an older and a nobler descent than either you, madam, or myself. In his veins runs the blood of the Stuarts, the Eglintons, the Grahames, and the Gordons. When, therefore, you apply the epithets of 'man' and 'person' to him, you injuriously insult a gentleman entitled to your highest consideration."

He ought to have added, also, for the "consideration" of his proud lady—"A short time back he was a pauper whom I sued and thrust into prison."

Mrs. Grahame was sure now she had been premature.

Margaret hated Flora more than ever. She had despised her before; she feared her now.

"Weally," cried the Duke, "this is a twuly bwilliant *dénouement* to owaw womance. Gwahame, you must pawsitively intwoduce me to that delightful young lady. Miss—what is haw name?"

"Wilton," responded Grahame; "Mrs. Grahame will probably make a visit to Miss Wilton, and introduce the young ladies. Miss Wilton, I have no doubt, will be induced to return the visit. This, as a matter of course. Our families are, though distantly, related. Mr. Wilton descends from the elder branch."

"I shall have the greatest pleasure in paying a visit to this pearl of beauty," said Mrs. Grahame, with an animation quite unusual to her. "I regret my hasty observations, but who could have dreamed that our next neighbour was of such distinguished birth and position; and a relative too? I will not defer my visit, and taking advantage of the relationship, waive a portion of that ceremony I consider it essential in other cases to observe."

"So I shall have, too, an introduction to this 'pearl of beauty,'" thought Lester Vane; "it will save me a world of trouble."

"May I not go with you when you pay your first visit to Miss Wilton, dear mamma?" asked Evangeline.

"Absurd!" muttered Margaret, contemptuously; "mamma will go alone; I shall not go."

Mr. Grahame frowned; his wife caught the expres-

sion of his face, and in a tone which her daughters all knew was intended to silence opposition, she said—

“Helen and Margaret will accompany me ; they will exert themselves to win the favourable opinion of their relative—attracting her to visit us by their cheerful smiles, rather than repelling her by any formal frigidity. You, Evangeline, who set all the rules of propriety at defiance, must remain at home, or you will only commit yourself in some such manner as heroines do in novels.”

“Don’t you think I ought to accompany you, madam?” exclaimed Malcolm, with a strong impression that he should get an opportunity of exchanging looks and words with Lotte. “I think the visit will hardly be *en règle*, without my presence.”

It suddenly struck Mr. Grahame that a match between Malcolm and Flora Wilton would, in all respects, be most desirable. The young lady possessed a long line of ancestry, wealth, and beauty. What more could a man desire in a wife? A marriage, too, would end the conflicting interests of both parties. He did not doubt for a moment, that Wilton would gladly embrace the advantages offered by such a plan, and he, therefore, almost looked upon it as being accomplished, his own future peace being secured by the arrangement.

It did not occur to him that Flora might object, or Malcolm offer any opposition. He looked upon mar-

riage as a contract, in which it was the parent's duty to secure for their children eligible matches, and for the children to unhesitatingly complete them.

He was immediately, therefore, anxious that Malcolm should accompany his mother, and his suggestion took the shape of a command. No one but himself had any inkling of his project, but though some little surprise was manifested, no remark was made or objection raised.

As the visit was not to be paid until the next morning, the subject was here changed, and Lester Vane, as before, addressed his attentions almost exclusively to Helen. He rarely spoke to her without conveying a meaning beyond the apparent import of his words. He omitted no opportunity, either by word or glance, to induce her to believe that he was fascinated by her personal attractions and charmed by the graces of her mind.

She threw herself as much in his way as possible, whether in the presence of her family or alone, and she exerted all her powers to enslave him. She was by turns full of fire and life, seemingly gratified by his presence; anon, cold and pettish. She would laugh with him, and frown at him, display interest in what he said or did when he appeared least to desire to chain her attention, and seem most provokingly indifferent when he wished her to listen to him heedfully.

Most of all, when alone, did she play with him.

When, by some tenderness of manner, he would be induced to commence acknowledgments warmer than those warranted by friendship, she would parry his observations, turn them to ridicule, or give to them an interpretation they were never intended to bear: so that he would trust only to his expressive eyes to say what she refused to hear his tongue utter.

He could tell by her drooping lid and rising blush that she comprehended that language, and that if she would defiantly encounter his gaze, she must read it and interpret it.

“She loves me,” he would say to himself, “and she must be mine—under what contract circumstances must alone decide for me.”

That decision was arrived at when he heard that Flora Wilton was well born and rich—his hand should be for her, his passion for Helen.

It is easy to make calculations based on probabilities, but when contingencies are left out, the result mostly takes a very different form to that which it first promised to assume.

Helen had carefully watched his countenance while her father spoke of Flora Wilton; she had not forgotten how his eyes seemed to gloat on her beauty when he beheld her in the garden, and she felt convinced by the expression which passed over his features when he learned that Miss Wilton was of good birth and rich, that he then formed designs respecting her.

A flush of indignation and mortification passed through her frame.

"I will bring him to my feet, and spurn him yet!" she said to herself.

It was in this spirit they were all but toying with each other, when Malcolm, who had been reading the *Times*, uttered an exclamation, and, turning to his father, he said—

"You remember young Riversdale, sir?—you do, Helen, of course," he cried, turning to his sister.

Had fame—life—depended upon an unchanged countenance, she must have lost both. She on the instant grew deathly pale; she could not reply—she merely bent her head.

"A son of Major Riversdale," said Mrs. Grahame; "I think we met them in the north?"

"Yes," returned Malcolm.

"Ah! I remember; his father died a beggar, and his uncle, an East India merchant, took charge of him—made him a clerk, or something of that kind," observed Mr. Grahame—"a person one could not notice now. Why did you introduce his name to our notice?"

"Here is a paragraph about him in the *Times*. It is rather a strange affair, I'll read it out," replied Malcolm.

"Do so," said his mother.

Helen held her breath. She felt that some dreadful disclosure was about to be made, which would overwhelm her, too. Oh, that she might not faint! If only

she did not faint, and could get to her room, to wrestle with the trial—for such it must be—alone! She sat with closed hands, teeth, her eyes only open, motionless as a statue. Malcolm turned his eyes upon the journal he held in his hand, and, in a loud, clear voice, read as follows:—

“A singular circumstance attended the departure from these shores of the Peninsula and Oriental Steam Company’s ship, the ‘Ripon,’ bearing the mails for India and China. When off the Needles, a young gentleman, whose name was ascertained to be Mr. Hugh Riversdale, was observed to be regarding the receding cliffs of England with deep emotion. Suddenly, uttering a loud cry, said by some who heard it to be the name of a lady, he sprang on to the taffrail of the ship, and leaped into the sea. Fortunately, a pilot-boat was standing off and on, waiting the arrival of an American liner. Her crew had observed the suicidal act, and made most noble efforts to rescue the young gentleman. Their exertions were, we are happy to say, so far crowned with success that they picked up the body in a lifeless state. Meanwhile, the engines of the ‘Ripon,’ under the thrilling cry of “a man overboard,” had been stopped and reversed, and the crew of the pilot-boat were thus enabled to convey the body on board the steam-ship—the most advisable course to be pursued, as the best medical assistance, with ready access to restoratives, could be there promptly afforded. We are unable to state whether the exertions to restore life were success-

ful, as on the recovery of the body the engines of the steamer were set in motion. The crew of the pilot-boat returned to their vessel, and the Ripon, at race-horse speed, proceeded on her distant voyage."

"Rather strange affair that!" concluded Malcolm, laying down the paper.

"Vewy womantic! ha! ha!" laughed the young Duke. "Pwepostewous folly that, to dwown oneself for love! Ha! ha!"

Suddenly they were all startled by a terrified cry bursting from the lips of Evangeline. She sprang from her seat, and twined her arms round her eldest sister.

"Helen! Helen!" she cried; "Helen, dearest Helen, you are ill, darling! Speak, Helen! Speak, for Heaven's sake! Oh, mamma, mamma, pray come to Helen; she is dying!"

Helen sat erect, still, rigid as a stone statue and as lifeless.

She had listened in a state of high-wrought feeling to the reading of the paragraph up to a certain point. She heard the description of Hugh's emotion at the sight of the diminishing heights of the land containing all that he loved or prized. She knew that her form—her averted form was at that instant before his humid eyes.

She heard his despairing call upon her name; she saw him suddenly spring up upon the vessel's edge, and leap out with a wild cry, plunging down, down into the dreadful depths of the surging sea, to find that

peaceful release from intense mental anguish which she had selfishly and heartlessly denied to him here.

Then all was dark !

She sat motionless, stark, corpse-like, consciousness departing from her, and leaving her without sense or motion.

Mr. and Mrs. Grahame were disturbed at the undignified departure from the proprieties of life displayed by both Helen and Evangeline. Mrs. Grahame especially was grieved to think that the example of icy immobility set on all occasions by Margaret Claverhouse was not followed by both her sisters. The bell was rung violently by Malcolm, who, except Evangeline, displayed the most feeling of the family. Chayter was summoned, and Helen, accompanied by Evangeline, was borne to her apartment.

Lester Vane retired to the garden.

Folding his arms, he paced the sinuous paths thoughtfully.

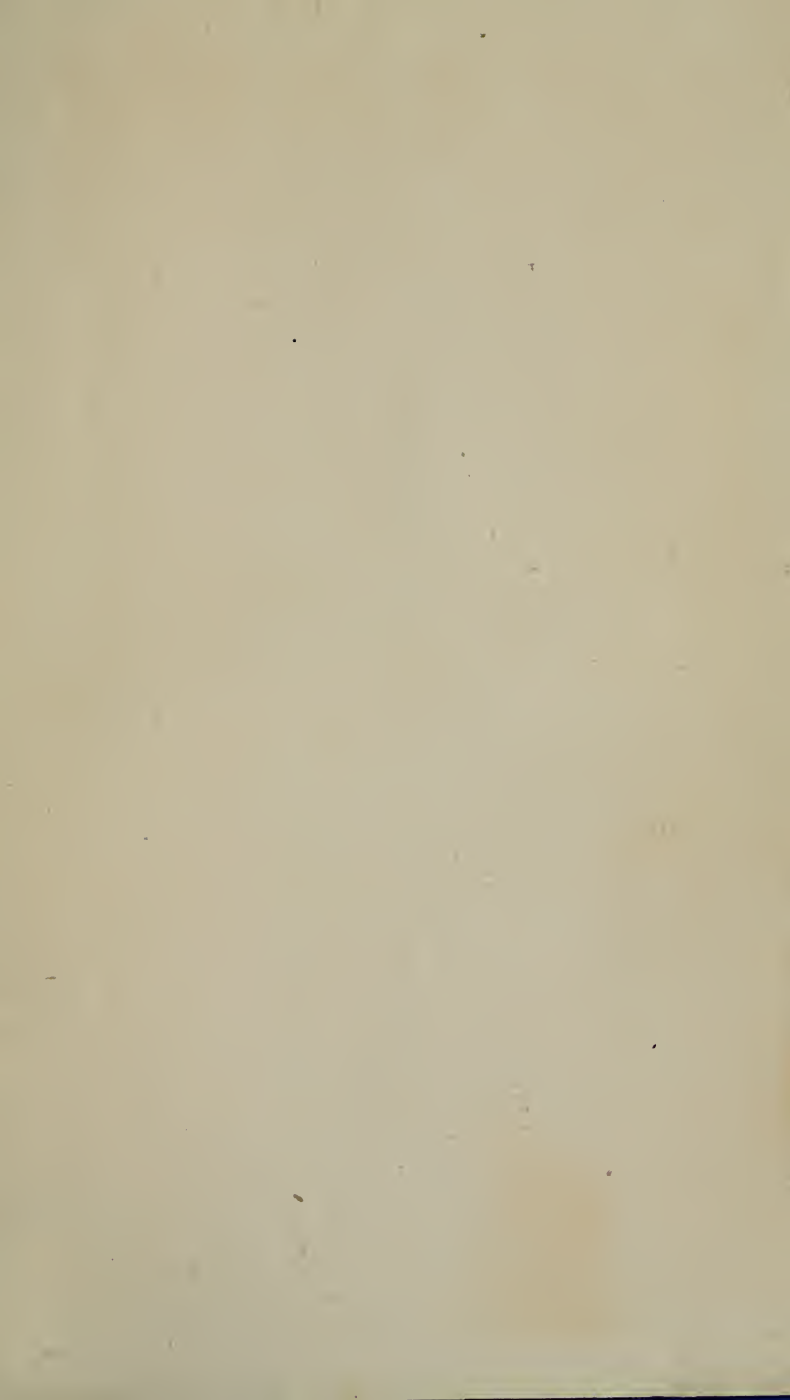
"So," he muttered, "the mystery is solved. This youth, Hugh Riversdale, was my assailant in the alcove, and Helen was his companion there. Hem ! His merchant uncle has despatched his clerk to India. He, out of his love-sick grief, like a mad fool, leaps into the sea, and she swoons to hear of his folly. She is selfish ; but she loves him and seeks to fool me. 'Um ! He struck me—this clerk. Well, she shall avenge the blow : away with thoughts of marriage ! No ; Miss Wilton, young, exquisitely lovely, of proud descent,

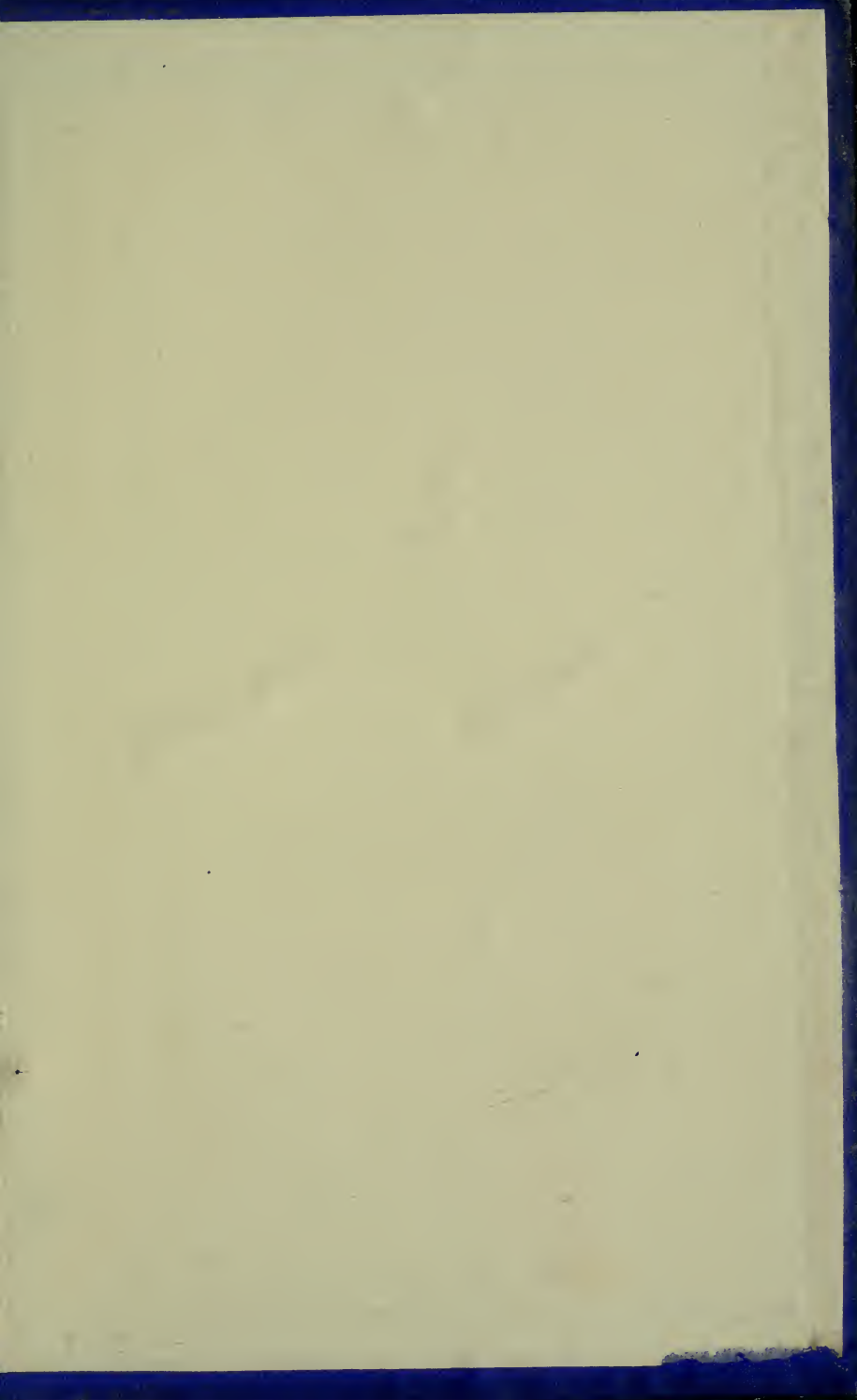
and great wealth, she shall be my bride ; while you, Helen, you—'um ! we shall see."

He leaned upon the slight iron rail which ran along the end of the garden, and gazed thoughtfully into the depths of the flowing stream running soundlessly by.

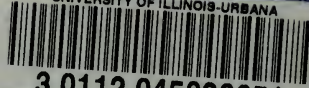
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